



The Circus and Aerial Performances: simulation of risk and concealment of pain

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ABSTRACT – The Circus and Aerial Performances: simulation of risk and concealment of pain – The article examines the relationship between risk and pain as elements present in the construction, exhibition and reception of aerial circus shows. There is a bibliographic review on the theme of *pain* and *risk*, analyzing them as perceptive processes that encompass biological, affective and cultural issues. Finally, it describes the aerial circus performance, identifying that the relationship between these phenomena appears as an imbricated paradox in its presentation.

Keywords: **Circus. Aerial Performances. Risk. Pain. Circus Art.**

RÉSUMÉ – Cirque et des Spectacles Aériens: la simulation du risque et la dissimulation de la douleur – L'article examine la relation entre le risque et la douleur comme éléments présents dans la construction, l'exposition et la réception des spectacles de cirque aérien. Pour ce faire, il effectue une revue bibliographique sur le thème de la *douleur* et du *risque*, en les analysant comme des processus perceptifs qui englobent des questions biologiques, affectives et culturelles. Enfin, il caractérise la performance de cirque aérien en identifiant que la relation entre ces phénomènes se présente comme un paradoxe imbriqué dans sa présentation.

Mots-clés: **Cirque. Performances Aériennes. Risque. Douleur. Art Du Cirque.**

RESUMO – O Circo e as Performances Aéreas: a simulação do risco e a dissimulação da dor – O artigo examina a relação do risco e da dor como elementos presentes na construção, exibição e recepção de espetáculos circenses aéreos. Para tanto, realiza uma revisão bibliográfica sobre o tema *dor* e *risco*, analisando-os como processos perceptivos que englobam questões biológicas, afetivas e culturais. Por fim, caracteriza a performance circense aérea, identificando que a relação entre tais fenômenos se apresenta como paradoxo imbricado em sua apresentação.

Palavras-chave: **Circo. Performances Aéreas. Risco. Dor. Arte Circense.**

Introduction

This article is a development of the doctoral research from the Graduate Program in Cultural Performances in the interdisciplinary area of the *Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior* (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) (CAPES)¹, *A Dor e o Risco no Circo* (Pain and Risk in the Circus), begun in 2020. The selection presented here examines the symbiotic relationship that is established between pain and risk in the construction of aerial circus performances. This relationship happens through the paradox of the simulation of risk and the concealment of pain in these presentations. The interpretation of the phenomenon of *pain* is based on a review of recent studies that consider pain as more than a physical and mental sensation. The perception of pain also develops according to cultural and emotional aspects. Alongside this perceptive phenomenon, a literature review is carried out regarding *risk*, identified as an element inherent to human life, whereby its perception and experience are also influenced by social and cultural aspects.

In circus performances, the bodies seem to want to accomplish the impossible and break limits, seeking balance in moments of extreme instability. These bodies seem to fly and/or float on a trapeze, on a rope, or through acrobatic jumps on the ground, searching for, ignoring, or even overcoming the force of gravity, risking their lives, as if nature might finally come under control, in an instant of time. In the most diverse expressions found in the circus, its artists reveal various ways of using the body, in a displacement that temporarily masters the challenges of the world, employing unconventional (or extraordinary) ways of using human movement. There is an attempt to randomly fling themselves into the air and throw an unimaginable quantity and/or quality of objects through juggling, which once briefly controlled will be sent back into the air.

Such characteristics have been part of this spectacle since ancient times, as can be seen in the literature that carries out historical analyses of these activities. Mario Fernando Bolognesi, PhD in Arts and whose studies are focused on the circus, clowning and comedy, when reflecting on the transition process of the artistic performances, held in Parisian fairs and indoors in the 18th century, and ushering in what some authors call the mod-

ern circus, states that, in such performances, the comic scenes were interspersed with scenes that featured virtuosity, the “unusual and risk” (Bolognesi, 2020, p. 12).

The confrontation of risk is an important element in these performances. The intense training is aimed at the apparent control of these risks (the disequilibrium, the artist’s fall, the falling of the balls, etc.) and the construction of its intended presentation as another natural way of being, as an extra-ordinary act (Barba; Savarese, 1990). This controls the risk and also the pain, as in the case of the little ballerina that floats on her fragile tip-py toes.

Human beings share a natural condition of vulnerability that brings them into contact with risky situations on a daily basis. For this reason, risk has been the object of study in several areas, as pointed out by the French anthropologist and sociologist David Le Breton (1995), from the *Université de Strasbourg*, in his book *La sociologie du risque*, which also highlights the many significations of risk.

Other research helps us to understand the complexity involved in analyzing this phenomenon and to comprehend how the concept of risk itself has changed historically and socially. Renato Rocha Lieber and Nicolina Silvana Romano Lieber (2002), PhDs in Public Health, in a paper entitled *O Conceito de Risco: Janus reinventado* (The Concept of Risk: Janus reinvented), emphasize the dubious and interpretative character of such a concept, arguing that, although it is apparently understood by all, “this comprehension is not as clear as it may seem” (Lieber; Lieber, 2002, p. 2), and may have different connotations throughout human history. Sociologist Ulrich Beck (2010), in his book *Risk Society: towards a new modernity* (1986), reflects on the threats produced by industrial societies and how the risks arising from recent transformations since the mid-20th century (given the form that productive forces have developed, the increase in mass media, the production of toxic waste, and the unbridled desires for self-fulfillment that lead to an individualization process, etc.) influence the manner of conceiving and controlling the risks inherent in such transformations in contemporary times.

Other works that are essential to the analyses constructed here are the books *Ritual, Risco e Arte Circense: o homem em situações-limites* (Ritual, Risk

and Circus Art: man in situations on the limit), by philosopher and doctor in sociology Luiz Guilherme Veiga de Almeida (2008), and *Conduites à risque: des jeux de mort aux jeux de vivre*, by David Le Breton (2009). Both offer an overview of how to explain the phenomenon of risk that differs from attempts to analyze the ways societies seek to remedy and/or mitigate risk. In these works, the authors also propose an analysis of people's conscious or unconscious pursuit of this element. Human beings, complex beings that are socially and culturally constituted, often see risk not only as a danger that must be neutralized and/or avoided, but also as a way of experiencing life to its fullest by facing it.

For Le Breton (2009), people who are willing to engage in risky activities (adventure sports such as climbing and parachuting, as examples) face the risk deliberately, in more or less controlled conditions, and thus play a symbolic game with death, feeling fuller when they come out unscathed. Complementing this idea, Almeida (2008) emphasizes that risk is capable of providing a *sensorial displacement*, that is, it pushes the individual to extrapolate his/her everyday senses.

As such, in the pursuit of these risky situations, one also looks for a certain control over them, so that there is success at the end of the action (whether in adventure sports or in an aerial circus performance). Training and repetitions of techniques comprise this process and will very likely lead to a necessary and expected encounter with pain.

As a result of the training, the artists gradually acquire marks and (re)significations of the body and the actions performed. They start to develop a body with scars and marks (from calluses and burns that occur during the acquisition of movements, for example) made by means of devices, such as the *lyra*, a suspended metal hoop on which the artist performs acrobatics; the *trapeze*, a device similar to the swing, consisting of a wooden or metal bar, supported at the ends by two ropes, or the *acrobatic fabric*, a long fabric that has a point of support on a suspended structure and which, despite shaping itself to the artist's body during the execution of acrobatics, can cause friction burns to the skin.

Besides the marks, resulting from bruises and minor injuries, the body of the artists often has one muscular group that is more developed than another, due to its excessive employment in a certain modality. Aerialists, for

example – circus artists who perform in the aerial space, the focus of this article – usually have more developed upper limb muscle groups than lower limb muscle groups.

There is recent research on pain, such as *Conceptualizing suffering and pain*, produced by Noelia Bueno-Gómez (2017), Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oviedo, Spain, or studies conducted in bioethics and philosophy of human suffering, such as the work *A ciência da dor: sobre fibromialgia e outras síndromes dolorosas* (The science of pain: on fibromyalgia and other painful syndromes), by Pedro Ming Azevedo (2018), a physician specialized in autoimmune disease genetics, which recognizes that this sensory phenomenon is strongly linked to diverse emotions and that it depends on the moment and context in which the pain is felt. The writings of Le Breton (2010; 2013), who has studied pain and its strong relationships with affective and cultural issues, have also been along these lines. *Anthropologie de la douleur* (2013) and *Expériences de la douleur: entre destruction et renaissance* (2010) develop the aspect of pain not only as a purely biological sensation, as indicated by studies based on classical medicine. Therefore, pain, when integrated in actions loaded with affectivity, can acquire different connotations, beyond a suffering from which it is necessary to retreat.

Risk and pain are thus identified as highly complex phenomena, and their analysis depends directly on the context involved. From this perspective, we examine aerial circus performances, which, in general, are defined as those in which the performer executes actions on devices that are suspended, with no direct contact with the ground, and often at a great height. There are countless devices used in such performances, some of them being more conventional, such as the trapeze, the lyra, acrobatic fabric, or equipment specifically created by an artist for a specific performance, as long as it is *suspended*.

Despite dealing with actions/movements outside the standards established by the everyday social context (such as supporting the body by the upper limbs – shoulders, arms, and hands – instead of using the lower limbs – hips, legs, feet) and the difficulties and limitations that may appear at the beginning of training, the artists build up a familiarity with such movements, performing them in a way that appears natural and controlled during their presentations. The quest to master a certain technique in order to

execute a particular movement requires a lot of body control and strength, often accompanied by a painful and risky process, which are key elements in this type of work.

Pain and risk

In a simple manner, risk can be taken to mean probability, and this is enough to show the ambivalence of the term. Lieber and Lieber (2002), when trying to expose the antilogy, that is, the contradictions involving the discourses of risk, delved into the search for the origin and etymology of the term. According to them:

In short, risk may have had at its origin a very specific use, suitable for large-scale ventures with little certainty of success, such as navigation or military occupation. It was possibly a mercantile term, which, by apportioning losses and benefits, acquired this polysemy characteristic of *gaining and losing simultaneously* (Lieber; Lieber, 2002, p.72).

The authors also emphasize the transformations that the definition of risk has undergone throughout history and the way it no longer expresses neutrality and has acquired a negative weight, being synonymous with danger, in modern times.

From the standpoint of Anthropology and Sociology, Le Breton (2009) points out, in his book *Conduites à risque : des jeux de mort aux jeux de vivre*, that these areas have approached the phenomenon of risk based on understanding the ways that society seeks to identify and control, the dangers contained in climatic incidences, the impact of humans on the ecosystem, the life and health habits of the population, etc. In addition, they address how the population considers itself at risk or not in the face of these phenomena. For Le Breton (2009, p. 1-2), “[...] these attitudes are linked to the identification of the technological and social points of vulnerability and are used to analyze behaviors, design prevention and information systems, etc.”

Ulrich Beck (2010), German sociologist, follows this line, as can be seen in his work *Risk society: towards a new modernity*, in which he associates the production of wealth in the modern era with the production of social risks, reflecting on how the modernization process has occurred concomitantly with the production of threats and risks of various types (environ-

mental, social, psychological, etc.) and on how these risks can be minimized and/or avoided.

However, there is another line of risk analysis, as Le Breton points out. This, in turn, “[...] is more concerned with the meaning of the activities in which individuals engage in their personal or professional lives, and in their leisure, to confront or protect themselves from risk” (Le Breton, 2009, p. 2). It is true that risk can be analyzed from various angles and contexts. The excessive preoccupation with eliminating risks in today’s society comes from the world’s great and rapid evolution (industrial, technological, economic), an idea that is also visible in Beck’s work. Globalization is largely responsible for amplifying the feeling of insecurity in a generalized way. “In a world where everything is interconnected, no refuge is possible anymore and threats can assume countless aspects”, as Le Breton (2009, p.15) states. It is therefore considered that affectivity and social and cultural discourses are strongly implicated in the notion and perception of risk.

Given this panoramic view of risk and society, one can see that human beings face risk on a daily basis, in the most ordinary activities of their daily lives, often in an uncontrolled manner.

Almeida’s approach (2008, p. 135), another key author in this research, makes another distinction and focuses on the “[...] risk sought beyond the everyday [...]”. For Almeida, there is a risk consciously sought by people, by choice, and, according to him:

[...] from the sensorial point of view, risk appears as a kind of catalyst for extra-routine sensory processes. The relationship between risk and alteration of the senses is ambivalent: on the one hand, any and every situation that demands something from the senses and the body that goes beyond their ordinary activities will necessarily be experienced as risky and dangerous. On the other hand, exposure to risky situations is something that pushes the individual to use his/her senses in a non-ordinary way, that is, in an extraordinary way (Almeida, 2008, p. 137).

In this context, risk is seen as an element that can be analyzed from several angles, as well as interpreted in different ways, with the main focus being its analysis as a phenomenon that calls for a wider use of the senses (Almeida, 2008). When walking on an uneven sidewalk, unfamiliar to pedestrians, they will widen their attention to perform their task (to traverse

the route on the sidewalk) without any damage occurring to them, and they may also look for a less risky place to complete their route. However, contrary to what one might think, and as pointed out by the authors cited, even if modern societies exercise constant vigilance in pursuit of control and avoidance of daily risks, human beings seek ways to be in contact with this phenomenon.

What one can perceive, [...] is the fact that life itself contains different levels of sensory cohesion and, therefore, different levels of exposure to risk. This fact seems to be a necessity of man's own sensory life, and proof of this is the presence of games, risk-taking activities, rituals or art in all cultures (Almeida, 2008, p. 124).

A paradoxical situation, as Renato Russo sings: "Everything is pain. And all pain comes from the desire not to feel pain. When the sun hits the window [...]" (Russo; Villa-Lobo; Bonfá, 1989). Just like risk, pain is extremely complex to analyze. The understanding of pain as a sensation arising from some injury and causing suffering is not unusual. Moreover, comprehending it as merely the result of an injury that is perceived by nerve endings points to and reaffirms the limited concept of pain adopted by classical medicine and common sense.

According to Bueno-Gómez (2017), the traditional view of pain by classical Medicine entails a dichotomized view of human beings, viewing them solely as two separate entities, body and mind, which is why it has been criticized since the beginning of the 20th century. One cannot ignore the fact that individuals are biopsychosocial beings who influence and are influenced by the culture around them.

In some recent works that present a conception of pain from the Biology and Medicine viewpoint, such as the work *A dor e os seus aspectos multidimensionais* (Pain and its multidimensional aspects), written by professor and neurologist Jaime Olavo Marquez (2011), the subjectivity of this phenomenon is highlighted. For Marquez, nociception² (perception of pain, from the Latin *nocere*) is the neural process in which the stimulus that can awaken pain is detected by the nervous system, which is based on a biopsychosocial mechanism:

Pain not only depends on the nature and intensity of the stimulus. It is influenced by psychosocial and neurosensory factors. It is modulated in the

central nervous system, and the interaction between nociceptive stimuli and modulating factors results in the neurosensory experience of pain. The quality and quantity of pain depends (and varies from person to person) on the *understanding of the pain-producing situation*, previous experience with the pain trigger, *culture*, the person's attention, anxiety, and ability to abstract from noxious sensations (distraction), and feelings of pain control (Marquez, 2011, p. 29, our italics).

In the book *Physiological Psychology*, Clifford Thomas Morgan (1973) states that, although the physiological mechanism of human behavior seems simple at first, one cannot disregard the influence of emotion on this mechanism (that is, the affective aspect that each individual develops in each context or situation). Individuals do not escape affective relationships, and this can interfere in the ways they feel and how they deal with this phenomenon, which, at first, may seem solely biological.

It becomes important to start from the concepts of pain established in the literature from Medicine, because, even in this kind of research, the subjective value of pain is punctuated, sometimes directly, and sometimes indirectly. In his book *A ciência da dor: sobre fibromialgia e outras síndromes dolorosas*, Azevedo (2018, p. 38) highlights that “[...] affective factors influence the emotional weight that pain will assume and, therefore, influence the entire perception of pain”.

Such a phenomenon can be perceived and understood as a physiological process, but the ways in which each individual deals with that sensation are not a consequence that is definitively and easily characterizable. Another common mistake is to consider pain as a mere physical sensation arising out of injuries and, because it is a sensation that causes suffering, must entail the removal of the individual from that which is causing the sensation. Le Breton (2013, p.19-20) considers that “[...] people do not always flee from pain, although modernity sees in it an archaism that medicine should eradicate without delay. There are social uses for pain; in fact, it is an instrument that can have many purposes”.

Some of the purposes stated by the author are described based on religion, in which pain can be proof of devotion, contexts in which some people perceive it as necessary to continue existing. Pain is used as a tool for correction, through the imposition of punishment, and also by certain communities to legitimize identities and rites of passage, giving the one ini-

tiated a new social status. For Le Breton (2013), pain is a strangeness that removes the everyday invisibility of the body.

Pain is a structural part of the sensory framework that exists in society. The way to access it (and the way it will be felt and understood by the subject) varies depending on how this access happens, and this becomes clear when we reflect on certain situations. For example: if, in everyday life, one abruptly feels a pain caused by a cut or a puncture to the finger, while performing some domestic activity that is considered simple, most likely the relationship with this pain will have a character that is considered negative. It will be felt differently if compared to what individuals who practice corporal suspension feel when their skins are pierced by metal hooks to experience/present the sensation of literally *hanging* by the skin. Such sensations will be experienced differently depending on how the individuals arrived at them. In the first example, there was an abrupt arrival, requiring access to an extraordinary sensory dome for which the individual was not prepared. In the second situation, there is a previously experienced psychological and even physical preparation to *spontaneously* receive that sensation, part of a larger process. This is the manifestation of the symbolic sphere.

For Le Breton (2013, p. 16),

The pain felt is not, therefore, a simple sensory flow, but a perception that first raises the question of the individual's relation to the world and the accumulated experience regarding it. It does not escape the anthropological condition of the other perceptions. It is simultaneously experienced and evaluated, integrated in terms of meaning and value. Never purely physiological, pain belongs to the symbolic sphere.

If pain is fully related to the symbolic sphere, *pain is not only suffered*, it is represented and presented. To understand pain, in greater amplitude and complexity, it is necessary to abandon concepts that simplify and stereotype it and consider it as unique within each experience lived by different subjects. According to Le Breton (2010, p. 13), "The intimate relationship with pain depends on the meaning it has at the moment it affects the individual. [...] Pain is first of all a fact of situation".

But, after all, what are the relationships established between these elements and aerial circus performance?

Aerial circus performances: on the simulation of risk and the concealment of pain

In order to understand aerial circus performances, we must firstly remember that what characterizes such performances is the space in which they take place: the aerial space. Cláudia Regina Millás (2014), artist and circus researcher, in her dissertation *Trajelórias de risco, treinamento e criação: experiências vividas nos espaços vertical e aéreo* (Trajectories of risk, training and creation: lived experiences in vertical and aerial spaces), proposes bringing to the reader (inhabitant of the flat world, according to her) the sensations, possibilities, forms and visions of the aerial space, based on her training and creation experiences.

First of all, she explains the need to use the term Space, with a capital letter, to understand that it is a space-place (both in terms of geographical location and in terms of space of creation, affective relations and experiences). When describing Aerial Space, Cláudia Millás highlights the poetic nature of this space-place with infinite possibilities of being and existing off the ground, stating that, for her, the Aerial Space: “[...] is the one we inhabit without a direct relationship with the ground, suspended, like a swing, a hammock, a trapeze or a suspended chair. [...] Here we are talking about not having our feet on the ground, flying or gliding. I feel that this place is, by nature, air” (Millás, 2014, p.13).

For her, the risk is evident in the sensations and confrontations of the aerialist (circus artist who performs in this place). According to the author, “in the exploration of the Spaces we find two forms of risk, one of them intrinsic to the practice, thus being a physical risk, and the other a risk as a form of knowledge, necessary in art” (Millás, 2014, p. 50). In this way, Millás realizes that the training of the aerialist has two paths that must be traveled concomitantly: one for the mastery of physical risk and another that consists in a creative training and that allows the artist to be present and open to creative processes.

Gabriel Coelho Mendonça (2016), artist and author of the dissertation *A linguagem circense, seus eixos poéticos e a virtuosidade acrobática* (The circus language, its poetic axes and acrobatic virtuosity), identifies virtuosity as a structuring element of circus language, which supports the entire poetic

universe of this language. The artist also works with five poetic axes, which are: the poetics of risk, poetics of bravery, athletic poetics, poetics of divinity, and poetics of ritual. There is a link between all the proposed poetic axes, and such a link can be perceived by the risk and the virtuosity.

The poetics of risk, fundamental in circus language, according to the author, is expressed when the artist performs activities that involve physical risk (and death). “And this real possibility of death in the arena enchants the audience and places them face-to-face with human limits, and, consequently, with their own existential condition. The mortal condition” (Mendonça, 2016, p. 37).

When thinking about aerial circus performances, Mendonça proposes two more poetic axes of this performance: the dream of flight and the fear of falling. For him, the poetical “the dream of flight” is capable of bringing to the audience the experience of achieving that which, while being considered impossible, has been dreamt of by man since ancient times: the possibility of flight. In an antagonistic and interdependent way, there is the fear of falling. To fulfill the dream of flight it is necessary to overcome the fear of falling, and it is this game that makes the aerial act surprising.

Circus aerial artists know this well. We can affirm that in this artistic language, the artist knows the dialectic of *desire for flight versus fear of falling*. In their day-to-day life they experience the fear of falling in search of increasingly virtuosic flying tricks. And they wisely bring this dialectic to the arena. There, the dream of flight is dramatized by their vertigo, a vertigo that is provoked to enjoy the victory of overcoming it (Mendonça, 2016, p. 70).

Erica Raquel Stoppel (2017), in her dissertation *O artista, o trapezio e o processo de criação: reflexões de uma trapezista da cena contemporânea* (The artist, the trapeze and the creative process: reflections of a trapeze artist from the contemporary scene), points out that “[...] an aerial acrobat [...] has mastery of the body and manages to evolve figures and sequences on an apparatus that keeps him/her far from the ground or in little contact with it” (Stoppel, 2017, p. 39). The artist also brings the risk to a special place in the work, reinforcing that it is an element present in the aerial circus act. According to her:

From the point of view of real responsibility, circus performers take the risk as a personal choice, and thus assume a responsibility towards themselves

and others. On the one hand, because they will bear the consequences of their own behavior, and on the other, because they must account for the actions they execute with others, for others, and in spite of others (Stoppel, 2017, p. 75).

Even with all the safety precautions involved in circus training, “[...] the risks in acrobatics are evident, and there is always a moment, a crucial moment, when the student is, it can be said, on his/her own, when their safety depends on their ability to overcome their own limits” (Almeida, 2008, p. 114).

The characterization of the air space undertaken by the artists in their research enables us to see that risk is always a strong point to be considered. As Baudrillard (1991, p. 9) states, to simulate is “to pretend to have what one does not have” and to dissimulate “is to pretend not to have what one has”. It is certain that the author, when producing the work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1991), referred to the production of simulacra by social relations and productions, especially in post-modern society. However, this study focuses on the concept of simulation and dissimulation because they seem to appropriately define the proposal analyzed here. Simulation, from the perspective presented here, refers to the risk represented in aerial performances, which is mixed with real risk, making it almost impossible to be distinguished by the audience. Similarly, to dissimulate refers to the artist’s *pretending* not to show the pain present in the creative process and, many times, in the execution of the performance.

Simulation of risk

It therefore becomes quite clear that risk is an intrinsic element of aerial circus performance. Besides the existence of a real physical risk, the artist tries to control it through technical mastery and the use of safety equipment. There is also a representation of risk in the extent to which the artist uses its apparent amplification, leading the audience to sharpen their senses even more by the tension, increased attention, and support for the performance.

For Philippe Goudard (2009, p. 25), although the risk taken in the performance is mostly real, there is also the symbolic risk, which can be exemplified in “[...] the fall of the juggler’s ball or even the unbalanced behavior of the clown”. According to him, circus work and learning are based on the bal-

ance-disequilibrium dialectic, that is, on learning to take risks, and on mastering disequilibrium. The artist trains to dominate the risk and is constantly in disequilibrium from the moment he/she begins to dominate it.

For Mendonça (2016), virtuosity is what enables the artist to *play* with the imminent fall, provoking in the audience the growing sensation of a possible fall, at the same time as that audience trusts the artist to carry out the performance, albeit wary. It is also the technical domain that allows the use of *tricks* to trigger this feeling, that is, actions or movements during the performance that “[...] serve the function of making the audience’s experience more vivid in relation to the risk taken by the acrobat” (Mendonça, 2016, p. 55).

The simulation occurs, then, from the moment that the risk ceases to be merely real (at least in part, since the artist trained for the mastery and execution of the movements performed) and becomes a represented risk, becoming doubly part of the performance’s aesthetics. The simulation takes place through the play of representing the possibility of a fall or a mistake, when the artist struggles incessantly to dominate and control his/her action.

Working on the affirmation that circus art is the only language among the performing arts that puts real danger on stage, and asserting that it is exactly such a fact that makes the audience establish a connection with the artist, since it exposes the human existential condition and its limits based on the possibility of death, Mendonça (2016, p. 38) points out that:

[...] the poetics of risk is sustained as long as the danger does not become a fact. Succumbing to danger destroys the risk situation, that is, the risk is in the imminence, not in the event. As such, in acrobatic acts, it is necessary for the acrobat to continually overcome danger in order to sustain the risk. Thus, the poetics of risk entails technical virtuosity.

It is not uncommon for one of the names used for certain movements in aerial apparatuses to be *falls*, that is, movements in which the performer seems to fall off the apparatus. Although they are called *falls*, they are usually apparently sudden transitions: from the top of the lyra to the bottom of it; a movement in which the performer, sitting on the trapeze bar, lets him/herself *fall* backwards, locking the movement by bending the knees, until upside down, or a sliding process from the top to the bottom of the fabric, for example.

It seems that being in touch with the imminence of a mistake leads the practitioner and the spectators, paradoxically, to a state of greater access to life. According to Millás (2014, p. 52):

We take peculiar pleasure in seeing others take risks, putting themselves out there. Whether it's when they risk climbing a rock-climbing wall, jumping off a circus trapeze, or standing in front of an audience. In a certain way, we seem to get closer to what that person is doing when we identify with their fragility, with their human side. We accompany the acrobat's jump, we put ourselves in that moment with him/her, we feel the pain and the fear, as if they were our own.

Millás (2014) also highlights the fact that this risk, which can provide fulfillment and be a creative space for the artist or high-risk sports athlete, involves training and knowledge of what is performed. This perspective dialogues with the one suggested by Le Breton (2009), since the non-control, non-total security, unpredictability, and awareness of this is what gives even more meaning and value to things, allowing humans to reinvent themselves, thereby rediscovering themselves and the world. For the author, “[...] the danger inherent in life consists in never risking oneself, in melting into a routine without harshness, never seeking to invent, neither in one's relationship with the world, nor in one's relationship with others” (Le Breton, 2009, p. 9).

As much as safety elements are increasingly in vogue and have become a primary concern in circus training and performances, the play with risk remains. The safety net, visible just below the trapeze, does not prevent the execution of certain movements from expressing the aesthetics of risk, or that when faking a *fall*, the performer is enveloped in an extraordinary sensory bubble, as is the watching audience.

Zezo de Oliveira (2015) states that performers demonstrate a possible mistake or weakness, revealing an ability *disguised* as incapacity, in order to achieve audience empathy. Accordingly, upon successfully accomplishing the execution of the performance, joy, contentment, a sense of relief, and satisfaction drive the experience felt by all spectators. Thus, in addition to learning the technique and the mastery of risk, the artist must also learn to use risk in an intentional, controlled and simulated way, always mindful

that it doesn't stop being simulated (i.e., become real with a possible fatality), which demands a high sensorial cohesion from the performer.

The process of playing with and simulating risk within a potentially real risk demands from the performers an arduous and intense training process. Marco Bortoleto and Daniela Calça (2007) point out the importance of training and an adequate physical fitness when they propose foundations for a teaching of aerial circus activities using acrobatic fabric. The aerial circus performance begins with the learning process itself, based on repetitions of movements, technical repetitions, and repetitions of the act that was learned. It is from this understanding that the study arrives at reflections on pain and its concealment in this process.

The concealment of pain

The process of repetition and the search for mastery of certain movements, in the aerial circus, leads to sensations such as the fear of the risk that something might go wrong, as well as physical pain (for example, supporting the body using only the hands on the trapeze or the lyra causes calluses and wounds to the hands, and certain movements with fabric cause friction burns to the artist's body). However, it should be noted that these injuries and pains resulting from the training and mastery of such activities are *hidden* at the time of the public performance. According to Almeida (2008, p. 109), "[...] the repetition necessary for rehearsal and training is unbearable to an observer, but it is in the ability to endure such repetition that the true origin of performance lies. The author further states that it is this "[...] invisibility of training that makes the *performance* extraordinary".

In the introduction to the chapters of the research presented by artist Cláudia Millás, there are letters written by Wanessa Di Guimarães³, who signs the work as a beginner in the suspended world. Such letters compose her reports and class diaries. Wanessa bases her letters on her creative processes and experiments in unconventional aerial apparatuses (such as the suspended chair, specially produced for the aerial space, in which artists carry out laboratories of creation and movement). When considering that the suspended chair is a place in the Aerial Space, Guimarães states that:

It is not at all easy to inhabit the world of the suspended chair. It requires strength, balance, perseverance, determination, courage, and endurance (*es-*

pecially of pain). Because there are friction *burns*. For me, after I get up there, it is usually a good feeling, but at the same time, a mixture of serenity and adrenaline, fear and relief, sometimes I even feel like crying. I don't know why (apud Millás, 2014, p. 30, our italics).

Wanessa also tries to list a series of risks that she runs in the suspended universe, and they are:

Risk of falling; Risk of flying; Risk of smiling; Risk of swinging; Risk of feeling; Risk of vertigo; *Risk of pain*; Risk of fright; Risk of fear; Risk of screaming; Risk of not liking that encounter; Risk of creating; Risk of seeing the world inverted; Risk of something coming up that you don't know how to name; Risk of swinging so hard that you will be thrown to the other side of the wall and hurt yourself; Risk [...] (Guimarães apud Millás, 2014, p. 45, our italics).

In these snippets it is possible to identify that pain is present, either directly or indirectly, in the process of training, creation, or presentation in the suspended/aerial apparatus. Regarding acrobatics (circus and aerial), although the spectator often appreciates the acrobatic movements as an exercise of freedom, it is clear that:

[...] the principles of acrobatic art are as simple as they are unchanging. That is why the exercises trained and the form of training them in contemporary circus has been the same for many years. Since the body's biomechanical structure doesn't change, the way to achieve certain goals tends to always remain the same (Almeida, 2008, p. 102).

Throughout the academic text, Stoppel (2017) provides records from a field diary. Her relationship with pain and adaptations is very present, as in the following account: "The bar is rigid, it doesn't budge. The ropes are pliable, but they burn. The object is cruel. The body suffers, adapts, suffers again, and again adapts" (Stoppel, 2017, p. 50). In mentioning Magali Sizorn (2008), the author identifies with her when she points out that, although the audience sees a certain lightness and ease of execution in certain movements, it is not perceived, at first, that learning such movements imposes a suffering on the body. "Confronting dream with reality, the body perceived by the spectator and experienced by the performer at first announces what will be part of the learning process: feeling pain and overcoming pain" (Stoppel, 2017, p. 51).

It is possible to identify that pain is a part of circus performance through its indirect mention in the literature on the topic and through direct references, as in the case of the 2019 *Carnets de prévention de las anté au travail - Les Arts du Cirque*, produced by the CMB (an inter-enterprise occupational health service in France), which presents a guide to risk prevention for circus professionals. In this guide, there is a topic focused on pain, in the part referring to health problems faced by circus performers. The document begins with the following passage:

The circus performer, who subjects the body to severe physical constraints, has a very particular relationship with pain: it is a familiar companion, which he/she learns to respect or which must be ignored in order to continue to perform the art. Intensive effort generates general pain at the muscular level, in the heart rate. It comes from ventilation, from increased body heat, and from the joints. But these pains calm down when the effort ends, and everything normalizes without organic lesion⁴ (CMB, 2019, p. 50).

The guide also points out that there are multiple causes of pain, and that the circus performer may feel pain during stretching, unusual exertions, and repetitions of movements (such as during the absorption of jumps, for example). Both the CMB guide and Stoppel (2017) emphasize that although pain is present in the performer's training, it should be taken seriously, because even if it is often motivated by a *trivial* cause, it can also be a sign of more serious problems.

There is no space in this article to answer the questions as to why artists are subjected to pain in session after session of training, although Stoppel provides a possible answer when he states that “[...] it is remarkable how the artist, driven by passion and pleasure to practice his craft and his art, goes beyond the limits of pain and adapts to work while injured” (Stoppel, 2017, p. 51).

The fact is that, as already mentioned, hanging one's body by the hands, for example, holding a wooden, iron, steel or aluminum bar, can cause calluses and small injuries, considered as consequences of such activity, part of the process. Moreover, pain can arise from “[...] repetitive, intense or extreme efforts, fatigue, lack of warm-up, and wear and tear” (Stoppel, 2017, p. 51).

The answers about how people deal with pain and why pain seems to play such a natural part in the practice of circus modalities are far from definitive. According to Azevedo (2018), the body is capable of producing and manipulating *maps* from the mechanisms for monitoring the external environment (exteroception), although dependent on the five senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch) and the mechanisms for monitoring the internal environment (interoception). These mechanisms basically seek to analyze how the external environment is influencing the internal environment, in order to maintain homeostasis, that is, the internal body balance, in search of a relative constancy suitable for the maintenance of life. These maps, in turn, are “[...] ‘neuronal representations’ of reality [...]” (Azevedo, 2018, p. 99).

The author points out that the chances of coping better with the environment, achieving success in activities, are greater the closer the map is to reality. This justifies the notion that extraordinary events require greater sensory cohesion from individuals, that is, all the individual’s senses are sharpened so that a reliable map of the situation can be created and, thus, a certain activity may be accomplished without incurring losses. When a word is read, for example, a representation of it is conceived, with characteristics such as shape, smell, color, etc. But the map that is created about something brings, according to Azevedo (2018, p. 100), “[...] at least three other parameters: feelings, a cognitive meaning, and a bibliographic history”.

Each word, or rather, the object to which a word refers, for example, has a cognitive meaning that varies from person to person. Although the origin of feelings is still imprecise from an anatomical point of view, Azevedo (2018) suggests that affective experiences are associated with the limits of homeostasis and that the way one reacts to objects or situations depends on the feelings they provoke. On the other hand, actions that provoke a negative feeling are those considered to hinder the attainment of homeostasis.

Meanwhile, it may be argued that pain, in the case of the processes involved in acquiring technical circus skills, in most situations, is not considered a villain or an attribute that will prevent the good functioning of the individual’s life, and can be mitigated by the presence of a master, teacher, or guide responsible for teaching such techniques (which gives an affective and trustworthy character to the process). When they are supported by

someone who has more knowledge about such elements and who encourages them to perform certain movements, demonstrating that the presence of pain is *normal* and is nothing more than a component in the learning process, in addition to the sensation of being able to overcome their own barriers and limits, the students end up internalizing this information (that pain is not something that prevents their activities), which becomes part of their sensorial maps.

This also occurs in people who practice other physical activities, which provide the accumulation of lactic acid in the muscles, this being an organic compound that “[...] is normally produced in the muscles after anaerobic activity and does not cause any damage to the tissue. However, its accumulation, such as that which occurs after intense physical activity, causes a great deal of pain” (Azevedo, 2018, p. 36).

However, while pain is such a constant element, it is usually concealed (not shown, or camouflaged) during the aerial performance. For Stoppel (2017, p. 51): “[...] in general, the idea of the trapeze artist’s prowess and the concept of the virtuous body seem to be tied to the thought of the body as a work tool.” And, although some scholars and circus researchers have already posed the question about the need for pain in circus performance, even though many believe it should not be that way, pain is there, present, and often veiled.

Also according to Stoppel (2017, p. 42), in the process of technical appropriation:

[...] the body gains very specific abilities that allow it to perform uncommon, unusual, or risky actions. This body builds itself up and, therefore, undergoes adaptations, sometimes injuries, but, nevertheless, trained for a certain purpose, it ceases to be a simple human body and manifests itself as superhuman. The fact that the body shows itself as an extraordinary body, heroic and with supernatural powers does not mean that it really is, but that it shows itself as such.

Pain is present in the teaching-learning process of aerial circus techniques but it is part of their aesthetics to hide this element, since the origin of these performances is based on the presentation of a human being with heroic characteristics, and movements that reinforce strength and/or lightness. The possibility of achieving the human dream of flight seems not to

be subjugated to pain, weakness or suffering, and has to be appreciated to the fullest.

One could suppose, perhaps, that pain is also concealed by the fact that it simply becomes a commonplace and normal element of training. Moreover, even if the proposal of an act tries to break this stereotype of the trapeze artist as a superman, as many artists and researchers already try to do, how many calluses were opened in the course of the construction of such a proposal? How many body parts have been burned by the friction with the fabric/rope, or how many bruises have appeared from the skin's contact with the bar? Unlike the risk, perhaps the spectator *may never know* how many marks, burns, and calluses there were, in short, the pains that permeated the process for the construction of an aerial act.

Final considerations

This study deals with two sensorial elements that subvert logics based on their intrinsic subjectivity. Even when analyzed within the scope of aerial circus performances, such elements continue to have their particular character in each context. When trying to understand the relationship between risk, pain and aerial circus performances, it was found that such a relationship can be expressed by the paradox of risk simulation and pain dissimulation.

In general, it is possible to consider that the aerial artist “[...] by placing him/herself at a great distance from the ground, [...] invests strongly in the Poetics of Risk” (Mendonça, 2016, p.63). It is noteworthy that, besides learning to control the risk, the aerialist must also learn to play with it, and part of this poetics is the simulation of a risk that is already controlled, expanding the perception, attention and support by the spectator to the performance.

In the search for control over these risks, there is an intense process of repetition in order to appropriate techniques and specific actions for the execution of the performance. In the training process and repetition of techniques to appropriate and master risk in the aerial space, the artists go through situations in which pain is present, either due to injuries (large or small) or muscle fatigue from excessive exercise.

However, far from considering pain from a common sense point of view, viewing it as a mere anatomical-physiological process, this paper sought to understand it from a greater complexity, since it is not simply a sensation from which human beings turn away. Pain can have its own meanings for each person and be present as a fact in the act of performance and in different contexts. However, it is worth mentioning that “[...] to understand the sensations that involve the body, it is necessary to seek its *raison d’être* not in the individual’s body, but in the individual him/herself with all the complexity of their personal history” (Le Breton, 2010, p. 14). This suggests the need for the continuation of this kind of study.

Although pain seems to be part of this whole process, it is usually veiled, especially in moments of public presentation, since the origins of aerial activities in the circus have close links with the notion of overcoming human limits, heroic representation and the achievement of the impossible, highlighting in this process strength, bravery and lightness.

When considering risk as a body manager in circus aesthetics, Marina Guzzo (2009, p. 53) states that:

The circus as a form of popular culture and as an art that sells and exhibits risk and the human limit has transited among man’s fears throughout history. It carries with it the ambiguities of the language of risk and the social processes referenced in it. Having the body as the center of the show, the circus organizes its structure in numbers that portray and expose the human condition of being constantly at risk and being safe.

As such, this article argues that the aesthetics of aerial circus performance, having risk as the main manager of the actions, and demanding an intense training process from the artists to master it, is strongly imbricated in the notion of risk simulation and pain concealment.

Notes

- ¹ A body linked to the Ministry of Education (MEC). The Graduate Program in Cultural Performances is linked to the Faculty of Social Sciences at Universidade Federal de Goiás (UFG).
- ² The term *nociception* was introduced in 1906 by the English neurologist Charles Scott Sherrington (1857-1952), Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1932.

- ³ Wanessa Di Guimarães is part of the research group *Coletivo Invertido*, created by artist and researcher Cláudia Millás, and participates in the latter's dissertation with a series of letters that introduce each chapter of the work. In the letters, Wanessa shares with the readers the experiences she went through in the vertical and aerial space along with the author of the research.
- ⁴ In the original French: "L'artiste de cirque, qui soumet son corps à des contraintes physiques fortes, a une relation tout à fait particulière à la douleur: elle est une compagne familière qu'il apprend à respecter ou qu'il doit ignorer pour continuer à exercer son art. L'effort intensif engendre une douleur générale au niveau des muscles, du rythme cardiaque, de la ventilation, de l'élévation de la chaleur corporelle, des articulations. Mais ces douleurs se calment à l'arrêt de l'effort et tout se normalise sans lésion organique" (CMB, 2019, p. 50).

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