

BEYOND THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY: SOCIAL CIRCUS AS AN INTERSECTIONAL AVENUE TO GLOBAL AESTHETICS AND UNIVERSAL ETHICS

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Abstract

While the Western world is a post-colonial society that attempts to guarantee an equal opportunity for success to all, objectives to uphold inclusion efforts in the primary education system often undermine the complexities of cultural histories and oppressions among individuals. The linear narrative of success and spiritual fulfillment, or the value we assign to our lives, in this society is one that often places economic surplus over the holistic development of the individual and of humanity. In disregarding cultural histories and the value of individual fulfillment, the Western world discredits the creative and communal potential of holistic art education in favor of capital capable subjects and class objectives. In this work, I advocate for a reevaluation of success and spiritual fulfillment in the Western world as well as the public education system. To move away from our knowledge economy, I propose one solution that includes social circus education as an artistic avenue for developing spiritual fulfillment on the local, person level, as well as compassion on the global, humanity level. I utilize the work of dance scholar, Sherry Shapiro, who also calls for a reevaluation of the Western



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human value system. I also expand on research theorist, Anna Carastathis, and her situational approach to oppression, provisional intersectionality, to foster meaningful art education.

Keywords: social circus, art education, intersectionality, neoliberalism, and ethics

Introduction

In the Global West, we are living in a globalized, neoliberal economy that scrutinizes individual activity and relationships based on economic potential and exchange. Through globalization, a nuanced twentieth century phenomenon, current themes such as economy, culture, climate, and tradition are now a part of a global forum as humans continue to define themselves, their traditions, and their relations to others. Globalization is ubiquitous as cultures and their histories are enmeshed and disseminated through modern institutions such as mass media and transnational capitalism. These institutions, which have been introduced and mandated by political hegemonic powers such as the United States and the European Union, circulate information through a cultural hierarchy, perpetuating the narrative of “us” and “them.” I echo previous work (Carastathis, 2016; Depaepe, 2012; Shapiro, 2008; Walter, 2014) when I write that while globalization recognizes diversity, the neoliberal view is a recolonizing, post-colonial view that praises competition and writes off economic inequalities as cultural or personal faults.

One way that the post-colonial, neoliberal view is disseminated globally is through the determinant concept of intersectionality. Research theorist Anna Carastathis defines intersectionality as a provisional theory. First prominent in scholarly discourse in the 1980s and 1990s along with globalization and stemming from late nineteenth century Black feminism, intersectionality pinpoints “multiply oppressed” identities among individual intersecting groups such as race, class, gender, and religious beliefs (Carastathis, 2016, p. 9). As a provisional approach, Carastathis (2016, p. 4) states intersectionality is meant “to get us to think about how we think...to grapple with and overcome our entrenched perceptual-cognitive habits of essentialism...and segregation.” However, as I will discuss, the current equalizing of culture through mass media, and the disregard for historical oppressions in the Western narrative of human potential renders intersectionality as a false determinant to discrimination. Throughout this paper, I refer to the ahistorical,

inclusive objectives as determinant intersectionality.

There are various powers in play regarding such determinant societal systems that underscore why success tends to favor economic capital instead of the holistic development of humanity. Education historian Marc Depaepe reminds us that Western society historically grounded education and societal prosperity in religion, which was a tool of behavioral control. As societies advanced through industrial and scientific innovations, and the clergy was no longer in charge of policy, nations placed societal prosperity solely on the “market of a child,” or potential in the industrialized economy (Depaepe, 2012, p. 135). Because education, including art education, is organized by government delegated ordinance in line with neoliberal ideology, the success of the human is determined by their ability to function within a knowledge economy.

In this work, where I refute determinant intersectionality and the knowledge economy, I agree with dance scholar, Sherry Shapiro, who calls on art educators to realize their power in fostering “global aesthetics and universal ethics.” These concepts are ultimately ways to “constitute a universal relationship [with self and others] in which the body becomes the concrete place... of human compassion” (Shapiro, 2008. p. 254). I also agree with Shapiro when she states that our neoliberal society has little to no recognition of colonial oppression and moves us towards a universal standard of inclusion (2008, p. 264). Spiritual fulfillment in this formulation, or the various values humans subscribe to which we give meaning and orientation to our lives, is based on the idea of the American dream and economic success rather than holistic fulfillment and world prosperity.

As a dancer and circus practitioner who has participated in the United States’s public-school system, I am attempting to rethink neoliberal value systems and answer the call for education reforms through social circus. As I will discuss both through my own experience as a member of the Nouveau Sud Circus Project, based in Charlotte, North Carolina, social circus is a

practice that utilizes circus arts in a creative ensemble environment to foster individual expression and cultural exchange. Separate from spectacle, circus is the practice of various art and movement forms that reveal an underlying sense of community, exploration, risk, and creativity. As a discipline practiced globally, circus is one way to intersect individual desires and cultures with art education.

Globally, I am calling for a reevaluation of the Western value system which places spiritual fulfillment on a spectrum of economic potential. On the local level, this reevaluation leads to a reform of the neoliberal public education system that currently perpetuates this knowledge economy. I also advocate for the realization of intersectionality as a provisional approach, rather than determinant, to foster global aesthetics and universal ethics, and I introduce social circus education as one discipline to nurture such aesthetics and ethics. I will demonstrate this concept by first, defining social circus in terms of provisional intersectionality (Bessone, 2017; Carastathis, 2016). I will then define the global aesthetic and universal ethics in terms of Shapiro (2008). Finally, I will refute the current Western human value system and knowledge economy, utilizing social circus as both a methodology for attaining spiritual fulfillment and an educative vessel for a global aesthetic and universal ethics (Kalin & Barney, 2018; Loring, 2017; Shapiro, 2008; Walter, 2014).

Provisional Intersectionality and the Social Circus

Social circus is one avenue in the Western world to educate future generations on how to view their bodies and their personal, local histories amidst a globalized world. It also teaches individuals how to situate themselves compassionately in relation to identities different from their own. I refrain from discussing circus within the performative arts for its circulation of “feelings of content” (Bessone, 2017, p. 656), or lack of critical questioning amidst the audience-performer relationship that may perpetuate fixed, neoliberal views of identities. The “feelings of content” arise when Western audiences view cross-cultural performances of hegemonic corporations, such

as Cirque du Soleil. These performances often display minoritarian bodies as token examples of success within the globalized world without acknowledging the historical oppression of such cultures in Western civilization (Bessone, 2017). I do foresee further research on the benefits of social circus performances within the local, community sector; however, this work focuses on circus in educational environments.

Stated above and here in my own terms, provisional intersectionality is a research approach involving syncretic awareness of human value, culture, and history to pinpoint overlapping systematic oppressions. This definition aligns with scholars such as social researcher, Ilaria Bessone, director of Nouveau Sud Circus Project, Carlos Alexis Cruz, and Shapiro who also advocate for Carastathis's (2016, p. 6) "reimagining of our identities and alignments." I appreciate Carastathis's work for refuting neoliberal definitions of intersectionality; these definitions, which include determinant intersectionality, removed the Black feminist roots of the term in favor of the universal inclusion theory. As it is currently used in education, social circus is also a victim of neoliberal globalization as seen in the removal of its culturally cultivated roots.

While there are some who utilize social circus as "an umbrella term for the use of circus arts in any caring, supportive or therapeutic setting" (as cited in Cadwell, 2018, p. 22), I agree with Bessone (2017, p. 652), when she underscores these definitions of social circus as "reinforcing reductionist views of 'the other' and unequal power relations." Cirque du Soleil takes the "responsibility" application a step further with their definition that claims "social circus" refers to "projects offering circus activities...to various at-risk groups living in precarious personal and social situations" (as cited in Bessone 2017, p. 653). Instead, utilizing my own experience as a circus practitioner and drawing from the work of Bessone (2017) and Cruz (2020), I have compiled a definition of social circus that states: Social circus is the process of expressing and exchanging individual struggles, histories, traditions, and transformations through physical movement, ensem-

ble engagement, and creative processes.

As a creative mover whose interests began with the historically rigid, European-based movement form of ballet, I was pleasantly surprised after my initial encounters with circus arts. I trained with performers three times my age and from across the globe specializing in their own indigenous practices. They willingly shared their skills and cultural connections with others. These practices include the intersections of martial arts, music, and dance, to acrobatics both on the ground and within aerial apparatuses. Some of these artists have backgrounds in disciplines such as dance or competitive gymnastics. Other practitioners come from no formal training at all and fostered their practice through personal exploration. When I was a student in circus class, the place you come from, the access you have to formal training, the type of body you were born with, and the practice you choose to focus on was irrelevant to the circus community. I was a ballet dancer experiencing break-dancing and acrobatics for the first time while building the strength to train on trapeze. The idea motivating circus practice is to use our bodies as creative vessels to unveil the extraordinary physical and connective possibilities within humans.

The Global Aesthetic and Universal Ethics

My research utilizes a global aesthetic and universal ethics because these two ideas allow us to recognize cultural specificity while also empathetically relating to others, an important concept we can nurture through social circus. Instead of the hegemonic “responsibility” that perpetuates one society above another, I advocate for social circus as a means to a global aesthetic and universal ethics that are conceptualized within the local societies themselves. Art as a product of culture and in the form of conscious movement — such as dance or social circus — conceptualizes ontic (physical, bodily) experiences within the ontological (the spiritual) realm to create connections between local, personal sensibilities, and global, outer contexts. While economic stability is arguably a necessary function for survival, the knowledge economy undermines both ontic and

ontological human value connections for excessive capital competition.

In the physical realm, utilizing a global aesthetic in education can remove the hierarchical stance that places White bodies and art forms above those of other cultures, and therefore ensure true cultural inclusion in classrooms. For example, when I was a dance student, I often heard the saying that ballet technique was the foundation for all dance; this creates a hierarchy of global movement genres in which ballet is considered the apex of dance for its “regal European aesthetic.” Western society has deemed ballet as a “high-art,” and the discipline is often held, globally, at a higher stature than other indigenous diasporas from continents such as Africa or South America (Shapiro, 2008, p. 255).

While Shapiro speaks primarily of dance movement, as I have discussed, colonial institutions are also present within circus performance and education. To correct this hierarchical stance, we must utilize global aesthetics in the Western world to think of human encounters “in a way that makes a global leap without an appropriation of others’ experiences, assuming a hierarchical stance... Finding ways that accept the particular and at the same time transcend the differences” (Shapiro, 2008, p. 254). As mentioned, I have trained with individuals who come from no circus background, or those who come from a background of a different global diaspora. We constantly exchange experiences to both learn new skills and share our own. In my own experience, when we work in an educational environment free of hierarchy, the outcome is a positive exchange of personal and global cultures.

In the ontological realm of self, to align the values of right and wrong on a universal scale is to compassionately recognize the shared experiences and suffering of all humans, and to do unto others as you would to yourself; we recognize a person’s sacred otherness, or their own ontological sense of self. To acknowledge universal ethics is to base the “rightness of an action,” as it affects the lives and histories of those it is directed toward, in “the other’s values, beliefs, princi-

ples, and aesthetic and religious sensibilities” (Shapiro, 2008, p. 261). Globally, universal ethics exposes human fears of threats to the very existence of our species — climate change, transnational pandemics, and the possibility of nuclear warfare, to name a few. On the local or personal level, the suffering body, one that experiences famine, plague, oppression, discrimination, projection, appropriation, and physical grief, “transcends the particularity of human existence and becomes a potent means of generating a sense of shared humanity” (Shapiro, 2008, p. 263). Similar to the way provisional intersectionality and a global aesthetic might help us “reimagine our identities and our alignments in coalitional terms” according to Carastathis (2016, p. 6), Shapiro’s call for universal ethics will ensure that the Western world does not lose touch with such shared coalitional experience.

The Knowledge Economy

In this section, I attempt to underscore how the Western knowledge economy teaches us that spiritual fulfillment, which was previously grounded in religious devotion, can be obtained through economic success. This is not to say spiritual fulfillment cannot occur in Western religion currently; I merely suggest that in our individual-centered society, educational goals often undermine spiritual fulfillment itself. I introduce independent scholar C.S. Walter (2014) for her examination of spiritual fulfillment within Western culture. She expands on Depaepe (2012) to conclude that not only was there a time where the organized religion of Christianity governed the Western world, there was a time when art in the form of unspoken theatricals or social dancing was understood as part of spiritual devotion. Walter states, in regards to Western religion, “when dancing as a group the notion of the body or economic difference was not something that was defined; the group meant more, and in worship and celebratory expression...” (2014, p. 95). There is an emphasis on the social aspect of movement art forms in pre-Renaissance era.

However, the scientific advancements of the Renaissance era caused a shift towards a

more cognitive, rather than intuitive, understanding of the universe. Neo-Darwinism and the theory of evolution began to debunk divine spirituality, and the artistic rituals attached to such spirituality. Nuanced scientific theories devalued the spiritual practice of art and assigned it to individual, nation-state expression, or folk art (Walter, 2014). I agree with Walter (2014, p. 97) in saying that delving deeper into scientific theory and technologic advancements gathers factual evidence about the operation of the world, and the expression of culture in the ontic realm; however, scientific reasoning does not explain ontological existential desires, fears, and questions pertaining to a person's sacred otherness.

The business of fulfillment in a free-market society, such as the United States, provides hope and a continuous labor supply for a class-justified circumstance of resource and wealth distribution (Walter, 2014). What this societal compliance means is that individuals are educated to believe that fulfillment is equal to material wealth and this "success" in modern post-colonial times is obtainable by all. In academia, we satisfy the knowledge capital by granting institutions with elevated exam scores or graduation rates higher amounts of funding; however, those scores and rates often undercut student potential for genuine knowledge absorption in favor of competitive or reward-based education.

As mentioned previously, critical analysis of determinant intersectionality shows how even art education is capitalized in post-colonial institutions. For example, I present education researchers Nadine M. Kalin and Daniel T. Barney (2018) who underscore the way art education functions in a "culture of compliance" through strict National Art Education Association (NAEA) guidelines that hold presenters to a presupposed relevancy, clarity, and appropriateness, or inoffensiveness (Kalin & Barney, 2018, p. 69). Art educators' subjectivity is replaced by simplistic objectives for consumers (learners), and student achievement is based on test scores determining ability to understand such state-mandated course, class, or grade level objectives. This should

sound familiar to those in educational settings where learning objectives are clearly spelled out in advance with clear takeaways in knowledge absorption. Educators are held by standards of what is already known, limiting challenging intellect, and learners are subject to what is already deemed economically viable. The knowledge economy, then, reduces art and scholarship to a “marketplace of ideas” to teach spiritual fulfillment as capital potential and therefor removes the creative, explorative, and questioning nature of art and humanity (Kalin & Barney, 2018, p. 68).

The objective consumption of knowledge, material, and social status for societal compliance in a world ruled by cognitive ability is not a destination to spiritual fulfillment, but an instant gratification. As religious spirituality was replaced by objectivity in a Western world, this objectivity also replaced the importance of spiritual activities such as acting, dancing, and singing in favor of excessive capital consumption of goods, experiences, and achievements. These consumptions, which satisfy a human desire to feel connected to a local societal system, will not satisfy the human desire for spiritual fulfillment. As the Western world discredits the creative and spiritually empathetic capabilities of humanity in favor of self-esteem and economic potential, we are perpetuating “the violent historical enmeshing...systems of capital, white supremacy, and empire” (Carastathis, 2016). This government-organized way of living, disseminated through classrooms, highlights the reason the Western world sees an increase in employees questioning why they trade their time on Earth for production (Walter, 2014, p. 16). We are ultimately left disconnected, unfulfilled, and unhappy. We can correct the disconnection through holistic legislation and education based on provisional intersectionality.

Social Circus as an Avenue to Spiritual Fulfillment and Global Compassion

An ontic and ontological evaluation of social circus allows us to see the discipline as a meaningful encounter that is one destination to both local, individual fulfillment, and global, human compassion. In my own dance training, I was emotionally drained from hearing how my

body shape did not fit the performer body mold, or that my interest in art was not economically viable. When I began practicing circus, my distress faded. My objective changed from becoming a professional performer to inspiring others using the enthusiasm and possibility of circus. Social circus holds the capacity of “unveiling meaning in new forms of attachment to the world and thus a renewed attention to the vitality of life” (as cited in Bessone, 2017, p. 656). The “new forms of attachment” arise from both ontic, creative community adaptations, and ontological, spiritual human connections.

In ontic terms, the expression of circus within a local culture is the connection of group improvement/sustainability through physical self-achievement and bodily interactions. Social researcher Philip A. Loring situates the circus as a model for a sustainable socio-ecological system that is both adaptable and persistent; the persistence of which is not whether predefined structures remain, but whether stakeholders continue to recognize, respect, and feel a sense of belonging to the system (Loring, 2017). His work is based on circus in the widely documented European Union; however, circus researcher P.R. Nisha (2014) verifies this argument within South Asia. Through field research and personal accounts with Indian circus artists, Nisha notes how even though the circus community is built in a specific location and a point in time, the artists constantly explore, adapt, and engage creatively with moments of life, and the Indian circus archive is constructed by the memorabilia of the community itself (Nisha, 2014).

While Loring (2012) introduces creative movement toward sustainability as an emotional feeling of belonging, creative adaptation is also a physical necessity for survival. Loring (2012) and Nisha’s (2014) work highlights the “creative principle of adjustment” that movement analyst Margaret H’Doubler introduces through cellular biology. H’Doubler (1998) observed that single living cells within bodies change and adapt to respond to their situations and environments, such as when injuries occur, and blood cells respond instantaneously. She states that “life’s cre-

ative principle of adjustment...is an inherent biological principle before it is an art principle” (H’Doubler, 1998, p. xxix). As an inherent biological act of sustainability, creativity is a means of experiencing the shared human quality of adapting as well as globally adapting with others. To discredit the explorative nature of creative movement in education is to discredit the life objective of sustainability.

Ontologically, social circus aligns with Shapiro (2008) and Walter’s (2014) emphasis on conscious movement with spirituality in a group environment. At the Nouveau Sud Circus Project, there is a transformative energy amidst the space. I never felt as if I were an outsider because it is the physical and creative variations among the members that enhance the circus dynamic. There are moments when we individually become educators, learners, and spectators. I may work separately with one or two members on a specific practice such as aerial hoop, or act with the ensemble to develop a group acrobatic skill. In either situation, there is a prospect of danger and impossibility that is reduced by an aura of trust, compassion, and community. Through perseverance and investment in communication, the impossible becomes possible, something learnt and achieved (Bessone, 2017, p. 656). We are invested in the safety, success, and stories of ourselves and each other’s bodies. Bessone provides an example through her own social circus research. Regarding one study in Quebec she states that:

circus provides opportunities for new physical and emotional experiences, and different perspectives on one’s own and others’ bodies, promoting group cohesion through the rather ‘simple’ agenda of ‘performing a circus trick successfully’. This...contributes to an immediate sense of satisfaction, self-achievement, and group improvement... (2017, p. 657)

Social circus is then an example of utilizing a global aesthetic to work toward universal ethics; we find a similar humanity in working toward the common goal of group success. Humans are praised for our cultural differences and using the provisional approach to difference that is inherent in social circus we illuminate the desire for movement away from suffering that we are other-

wise taught to limit through capital consumption.

Conclusion

We can imagine what our world might become when we challenge the current neoliberal perceptions of national capabilities and transnational consciousness through shared desires for movement away from suffering. I have argued that if the Western world pairs ontic, embodied suffering with ontological desire, and links the body with intellect, we have the potential to realize a sacred otherness within humanity. In attempting to define social circus as one possible avenue to overcome the challenge of neoliberal perceptions, I have also connected the nuanced research theory of provisional intersectionality with social circus to argue how we can produce education centered around a “global aesthetic with universal ethics as the goal” (Shapiro, 2008).

In this work, I have positioned social circus as one possible intervention to the existing primary education system. Currently, this research requires adequate field testing in public institutions, and I foresee additional research on the politics of the possible intersectional encounters within social circus. In education, working to understand humans in relation to shared experience—what the body feels—within the rational world might direct us toward the still-radical idea that “all humans share the same inalienable rights” (Shapiro, 2008). By educating and empowering generations through social circus as a creative discipline, we can destabilize colonial aesthetics and institutes, return creative agency to the individual, and illuminate shared desires for spiritual fulfillment, relationship, and communication.

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