

THE JUGGLER:

HOW SOCIAL CIRCUS HELPS CHILDREN FROM THE STELLENBOSCH AREA IN SOUTH AFRICA TO EMBODY, BECOME AWARE OF, AND CHALLENGE THE WALLS IN THEIR LANDSCAPE

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Introduction

We grow into the world, as the world grows in us.
(Ingold 2013: 746)

All over the world, children are moving for social change. *Cirque du Soleil*, one of the most famous global circuses, started a program, *Cirque du Monde*, to facilitate circus practice for youth all over the world: social circus. In their vision, social circus can function as an empowering practice that crosses boundaries. For my research, I focused on how children from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds from the Stellenbosch area in South Africa experience moving together in social circus.

The social circus I'd like to introduce is Sisonke circus.¹ Sisonke is the IsiXhosa word for 'we are together', which also presents the vision of the circus. In 2011, the circus was founded by Lionel Chanarin, who studied circus at the social circus Zip Zap in Cape Town himself. He is a professional trapeze artist, acrobat, juggler and clown, who dedicates most of his time to the social circus. On their webpage, they state that:

Through circus skills such as acrobatics, dance, juggling, trapeze, drama and much more, the children learn life skills such as communication skills, problem solving, health and safety, life skills as well as many other personal qualities such as trust, respect for others and equipment, accountability, responsibility, teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, risk management, empathy as well as physical health, strength, agility, flexibility, dexterity and vitality.²

They call Sisonke a family, where diverse communities come together through the medium of circus, dance and music. The program is free, giving people from a variety of backgrounds the chance to participate. There is a core group of forty participants, consisting of children from the age of seven to eighteen, who are coming from diverse ethnic, socio-economic and cultural communities in the Stellenbosch Valley in the Western Cape. As the founders of the Sisonke social circus argue, the impact goes beyond the core group only:

Performances are taken into communities where the diverse audiences share in the joy which the integrated youth of our rainbow nation brings, inspiring hope, enthusiasm, co-operation and love for one another through our youth.³

Sisonke wants to stimulate integration, connection and the formation of relationships from a young age. If you can't stimulate children to focus on the same-ness, to form a community that is not based on 'ethnicity' or exclusion, how are the adults - of the present and the future - going to do this?

In my film, I hope to show how social circus tries to bridge the existing gaps between children from different communities through movement. Michael Jackson explains that:

Our relationships with the world of others and the world around are relations of interest, that is, they are modes of inter-existence, informed by a struggle for the wherewithal for life. We are, therefore, not stable or set pieces, with established and im-mutable essences, destinies, or identities; we are constantly changing, formed and reformed, in the course of our relationships with others and our struggle for whatever helps us sustain and find fulfillment in life (Jackson 2013: 5).

'Inter-est'; one can only be(come), when we live and develop together, as constant movement amongst people. Social circus offers the children 'the chance to express themselves and be listened to, to realize their own potential and to make their own contribution as citizens of the world' (La Fortune 2011: 14 in MacCaffery 2011: 33). In this way, the focus is not on empowerment by focusing on ethnicity, but empowerment by focusing on crossing societal boundaries by working together and moving.

For Lionel, the two most important aspects in social circus practice are imagination and trust. Through circus, Lionel wants to give the children the opportunity to try to understand how one feels and thinks, using movement and trust. Imagination, contact and trust foster friendships and a teaching that reaches beyond the social circus practice. This is something that normally doesn't take place between children from different backgrounds and communities, because they don't get the opportunities to do so. Maybe social circus can be a way to encourage the children 'to participate in a world beyond our accustomed roles and to recognize themselves as members of a community, a common body' (Jackson 2013: 67).

The Moving Landscape

There are many ways to sketch the historical, sociological and cultural context the South African children grow up in. One is to use terms that refer to the South African landscape.

They kept telling me about the beauty of the South African landscape. Impatiently, I was waiting, when they were going to start about the social circus. What I didn't realize, was that they were talking about it all along.

My film opens with these sentences. The mountains, rivers, waterfalls, fields and oceans of South Africa are breathtaking. I was mesmerized by the beauty, but this beauty has a shadow-side as well; the inequalities between the people that are part of the landscape. The storyline of my film is implicitly based around the concept of landscape. Landscape encompasses a sense of place, as well as our past, our present, time, nature, culture and everything that we regard as our world (Ingold 2000, Jackson 2013, Basso 1996). It is living, breathing and constantly transforming; we and everything that it consists of form the landscape. Landscape is not just land, place, environment or nature. Landscape is something that entangles nature and culture, the people and their surroundings, all the living and non-living things on earth:

Neither is the landscape identical to nature, nor is it on the side of humanity against nature. As the familiar domain of our dwelling, it is with us, not against us, just as we are a part of it. (...) In landscape, each component enfolds within its essence the totality of its relations with each and every other (Ingold 2000: 191).

We *are* the landscape; it is the totality of the relations we have. We are just as much part of it as anything else around us is. Ingold argues that we cannot separate our (body-)selves, nature, place, environment and land from the landscape (2000: 193). Landscape is the collection of this formation, of this whole. It invokes time and place, past and present, nature and culture, in a continues process and tension (Bender 2006: 304). We can't isolate landscape into one subject; it is interconnected with everything of our existence, with a shared history and present.

The anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff, Sindre Bangstad and Thomas Eriksen had a conversation about the shared history and present of the South African landscape. Bangstad says:

Looking at South Africa in its present phase from the point of view of an external observer, it is fair to say that there has been a process of gradual disbursement of the great illusions many of us had in the transition from apartheid to democracy in the mid-1990s. Now, if you look at socio-economic indicators, inequalities seem to be rising, if anything. Poverty is still overwhelmingly black, whilst economic power remains overwhelmingly white (2012: 128).

The distinctions made on the basis of 'ethnicity' are still very present in daily South African life. Separation based on skin color linked to economical class is reality. Lots of (black) children grow up in poverty in the townships that border the rich neighborhoods. The criminality rates are high, and the perspective on 'real' equality low. As Jean Comaroff argues in the same conversation, 'notwithstanding the new freedoms and the new constitution, the gap between rich and poor is greater than before,

and it is still strongly correlated with differences of race' (2012: 122). In the early 1990s, Archbishop Tutu stated that ethnicity wasn't something that fits in the new democracy, but by the late 1990s, 'ethnicity' was used as a dividing identity marker, a factor that shapes the experience of everyday life (ibid.: 122).

Identity formation on the basis of ethnicity, by excluding others from your ethnic group, is still very much part of the daily lived reality of many South Africans. John Comaroff concludes the conversation by arguing that:

The rise of identity politics empowers a proportion of the population that had been previously disempowered, but it excludes many more than those that it includes. This is the ambiguity, the ambivalence inherent in the phenomenon. Can one make a politics out of that ambivalence? No, one cannot. One has to make a politics that resolves it, that turns its face against forms of empowerment that depend on perpetrating exclusion and disposability. About this we are not ambivalent. South Africa, like everywhere else, has got to fashion an answer to the problems of rising inequality and inequity, wherever it takes root, in identity politics, or anything else. (ibid: 133).

Comaroff and Comaroff argue in their book *Ethnicity, Inc.*, which they are discussing in this conversation, that people should be empowered from within the community, across communities; not by focusing on exclusion, but on inclusion. Not by fighting the socially constructed differences by identifying on the basis of ethnicity, but by encouraging the same-ness, the being-together, part of one society. Jess, the co-director of Sisonke, who is white, spoke to me about several crimes, including the killing of her father, which were perpetrated by people who are black. However, she considers that these conflicts pertain to class rather than racial divisions. With the social circus, she wants to focus on being-together as part of one society, that we need to build and improve together.

The home of Sisonke social circus, named 'The Shed', is based in this complex landscape. The Shed is a rebuilt big farm-hall, on the Spier wine farm; a 200 hectares piece of land, where many different people work, live and dwell. Lionel and Jess work, train and teach on the farm. During my time there, I observed the vast land that I was temporarily part of. Rereading my field notes, I noticed that the shapes and moods of the landscape shaped me as well. On a misty morning, I woke up and felt pretty sad. My thoughts felt cloudy. I couldn't do much, but I did manage to write the following passage:

21-07-2018

9.00am. Without knowing why, I'm extremely demotivated since last night. I'm not tidying anymore. I'm not doing the dishes. I'm doing nothing but reading my book. The book is about the relationship between a man and the mountains he grew up in. I am reminded of my childhood years, when I often strolled through the mountains for hours. In the end, all mountains look alike, the author writes, although just a few remain meaningful. Those mountains cherish your memories. The way the author describes the feeling of what mountains can do to a person when they hike, sleep, eat, love, or whatever, is exactly what it feels like to me. It makes me wistful, thinking about 'my' mountains, thinking about my loved ones. I'm sitting on the couch, silently, while it seems that life passes me by, unnoticed.

At least, that is what it feels like for now. It doesn't bother me, because I know the feeling will pass. It is just so quiet here. So incredibly quiet. The only thing I hear when I'm alone in The Shed late at night, is the shrinking of the roof when the cold creeps in, some weird bang-like sounds, and how the wind and a casual airplane fly over. In the cottage, I hear the same sounds. Including the shuffling of Lionel in the early morning when he gets out of bed up before I do, puts on his slippers, and boils water for his coffee. I hear the opening of the front door. He will smoke a cigarette with a cup of coffee while watching the sunrise on the porch. Secretly, I'm sharing that moment with him, without disturbing him. I think this is the moment of the day that he recharges himself briefly, when he prepares for the day. He prefers a short moment of solitude. Observing his ritual recharges me as well, in a way. It treasures a kind of contentment, an appreciation for the moment and the place. Not much later, I hear the roaring of his motorcycle. That is the moment that I get up. Sometimes when he is about to leave, sometimes when I hear the roar fade into the distance. I have the cottage, the morning and the mountains for myself.

This is a moment like that. It is morning, and I'm alone in the cottage. But today, I'm not feeling the contentment. It is misty. The mist hid the mountains for me, and for some reason, I find that difficult. The mountains give me a sense of rest, an insight in how big and divers this country is, and that I am able to witness everything from a safe distance, here on the farm. The blurring of the mountains blurs my thoughts. But luckily I know that one day, these mountains will cherish my memories.

This excerpt from my field notes touches upon the main topics I address in my film: landscape, movement and reflection. I experienced and observed how the landscape forms and is formed by the people that dwell in it, with me as a part of it. The landscape is ever-moving and changing. What I've learned from the encounter with the children from the social circus, is that walls shape both their mental and physical landscapes. In my film, I've used walls as a metaphor for the manifestation of the barriers between people that are still present in the South African society. I've tried to illustrate the conversations about mental walls by showing the physical walls that I've encountered. To fight the still walls that create the separation, we have to keep moving: we have to touch, and be touched by each other in a physical, emotional and mental way. We, as part of the landscape that is constantly moving and changing as well.

The inequalities in the current South African landscape are the memory and the result of a shared history. In this way, the landscape remembers. The memory of a shared history is embedded in the landscape, and therefore in the people. I see that the children want to move, but that they are restricted by walls that represent the (historical) barriers between people that the children have to challenge. Ingold argues that:

[T]o move, to know, and to describe are not separate operations that follow one another in series, but rather parallel facets of the same process - that of life itself. It is by moving that we know, and it is by moving, too, that we describe. (...) A being that moves, knows and describes must be observant. Being observant means being alive to the world (2011: xii).

The movements in social circus need some explanation. By doing movements that work on trust, team building and self-confidence, social circus tries to unconsciously teach them, through play, the same lessons in other aspects of life. For example, one of the first social circus exercises I've witnessed (and done) was falling off the stage into the arms of the children that catch you. All the children will stand in front of the stage, lined in two rows facing each other with their arms up. One person will stand on the stage with their back facing the group, who will fall backwards off the stage into their arms. I was filming them doing it, and slightly lost myself in my camera and image. Lionel dragged me out of my film-concentration; 'Now you have to do it!' I didn't really think about the fact that I was also able to do it, so I climbed on the stage and let myself fall. It was a lot more frightening than I expected. Since you aren't facing the children that will catch you, you don't really know what you're falling into. You just have to trust the fact that there are people standing on the ground who will catch you. After the catch, I immediately felt a better connection with the children, I was on their level: I was learning how to trust them and be trusted by them. This was the first (of many) exercises I joined. Before that, I wasn't really integrating, because I was standing on the sideline. By actually trusting them on a physical and emotional level, they automatically started to trust me as well.

Of all the subjects that social circus addresses, I found that Sisonke mostly focuses on developing trust. Especially in a society where fear and separation are very present, poverty of trust is a very important issue. Cadwell stresses the importance of this by focusing on how social circus teaches children how to trust each other and themselves (2018: 20). While describing different circus 'hard skills' (the actual acts of doing circus) and 'soft skills' (the social acts related to it), he argues that social circus is not used to teach specific circus techniques as a goal, but to teach *how* to do it, to learn how to trust yourself, your peers and teachers, and how to cope with failure (ibid.: 24). He concludes that:

The pedagogical effectiveness of youth and social circus is not limited to the acquisition of basic circus techniques but rather includes the development of an array of personal and social capabilities. Key among these is the ability for participants to trust themselves and to trust others (ibid.: 28).

This development of trust helps the children to cross the societal borders between communities, where the lack of trust is one of the main obstacles.

An integral part of the development of trust through movement, is touch. In daily life, the children can never be in touch, or touch each other, because most of them live separate lives in secluded neighborhoods. Classen argues: 'Touch is not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies. The culture of touch involves all of culture' (2005: 1). Cranny-Francis adds to this:

We know ourselves and the world through the sense of touch, crucially including our ability to touch ourselves and to make sense/meaning of that touch. At the point of touch, of contact (com- 'together' + tangere 'to touch'), we know both the self and the other, including the other that is also the self; that can reflect on and position the self. This is a point of connection, at which we perceive connection only through the perception of difference (2011: 468).

Through this perception of difference by being in touch, the children in the social circus become aware of their position in society, their privileges and disadvantages, their fears and certainties, the way they differ and are similar. Through touch they learn how it might be for someone else to grow up in different circumstances, which makes them reflect upon their own background. They become aware of the embodied walls that exist in their landscape, which prevents them from touching each other in daily life. These walls exist on the in- and outside, in the in- and external world, encompassed in the landscape. But even though these walls try to stop their movement, 'the creeping entanglements of life will always inevitably triumph over our attempts to box them in' (Ingold 2008: 1809).

As I have shown, landscape is constituted by numerous memories – either publicly remembered or deliberately forgotten – and lives that have been part of it. It shows that all our senses, our mind and our body, the social relations we engage in, the community we are part of, our sense of place, space and our environment are all interconnected. We are like rivers; carving our way through the high mountains, slowly making our pathway. The path will smoothen over time, it will be clearer, bigger and more prominent along the way we grow. It asks for a slow and constant pressure, movement, expansion, for others to learn from it afterwards. We are the landscape: we form it together in one big constant transformation. 'We', as in everything that is the landscape; the rivers, the mountains, the plants, the animals, the people: all in unity as one big moving entity with a shared memory. If I vanish, the landscape still exists; my vanishing is part of that existence. And the landscape will remember; these memories will be part of the children of the next generation.

Concluding Remarks on Visual Anthropology

To convey my interpretation, I focused on walls as a visual metaphor for the big barrier that exists between people from different socio-, cultural, economical groups in my film. Visual anthropology provides the methods to show how these children embody and become aware of these walls. We should recognize that cinema provides many possibilities for creating and sharing knowledge and exploring other lifeworlds. Suhr and Willerslev understand the invisible as the meaningful worlds observed by anthropologists - worlds that the anthropological ideal of thick description has always sought to highlight. They say that film can show us bodily details that offer a rich understanding of someone's experience, that are impossible to write down (2012: 291). With editing, we can create layers and metaphors that illustrate this experience that is impossible to communicate in words.

In my film, I created a story based on the way mental and physical walls that limit the children in their connections to each other. I start with the walls and the introduction in the circus, I continue with imagination, trust and reflection. These are the stages of awareness the children go through in the process of doing social circus. Firstly, they learn that other children lead different lives from them; they learn to imagine what it might be like for someone else. Secondly, they learn to trust and be trusted, to finally become aware of and challenge the walls that exist in the mental and physical landscape. I've also been through these stages; I've tried to imagine what it might be like for them, to grow up in South Africa. I won their trust and learned to trust them as well. Finally, I became aware of the mental and physical walls, something I didn't know about in the beginning. This is also what Suhr and Willerslev argue; although we should keep the right balance between realism and constructivism, simplicity and complexity, resonance and dissonance, 'montage of ethnographic films provides us with a complementary and resourceful means of making us imagine other people's worlds' (2012: 294, 293). Not by showing 'how it is', but how we, as anthropologists, imagine it to be. This leads me to a last

question; could this portrayal of imagination form anthropological theory? Anthropological theory should not 'attempt to draw the findings of various studies together into an overarching explanatory framework. There is no attempt to hunt for causes: the aim is rather to trace effect' (Mol 2010: 261). This is what I tried to do: to trace effect. The effect of movement in social circus on the children's experience of their embodied landscape, and the effect of visual methods in anthropological research.

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Notes

- ¹ See short promotion video (not made by me): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kC6FjJQbV9w>.

² <http://sisonkesocialcircus.org>.

³ <http://sisonkesocialcircus.org>.