

FROM TANGO TO VIDEO DANCE

Dance for the Camera in Argentina

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As in many parts of the world, the history of dance for the camera in Argentina must be sought in the history of Argentine film. However, on the film screen, the relationship between the moving image and dance has not always been fertile. Although they both share a commitment to movement and rhythm, the rigidity of film language has seldom given rise to a true dialogue with the choreographic art. Moreover, for much of its history, dance in film has been unable to free itself of its bonds to the theatrical stage, as witnessed in several films in which the camera assumes the position of the theater-viewer, staying at distance and shooting a dance conceived according to a frontal point of view from a single invariant perspective.

One of the first dance forms to reach the Argentine film screen was, naturally enough, the tango. In fact, just as in the United States, where sound movies were born hand in hand with jazz, in Argentina they were born hand in hand with our most popular music in a film entitled, quite simply, *Tango!* (1933). However, in this film as well as in others in which it is featured, the tango has been a kind of narrative flavoring. Its presence emphasizes the “Argentineness” of the characters and the stories; it is more a sign of identity rather than an artistic expression translated into movement. During the 1930’s, the tango –as cinema– was still young and trying to gain acceptance among the bourgeoisie of Buenos Aires, following its success in Paris. Film was one of the key instruments leading up to this acceptance. But what was highlighted was its Argentine and popular origins rather than its choreographic qualities. The proximity of the tango foreclosed its being treated with the more distanced view necessary to transfer it into the language of moving images.

For the shooting of dance and its presentation as such, the ballet was given preference. During the 1940’s, Argentine film making, having matured somewhat, sought to expand its audiences and to gain the Latin American market by leaving the localist tone of tango films and focusing more on the “grand” genres, subjects and stories of the international culture. Thus, ballet came to play a central role and to appear frequently in national film production. A case in point is the film, *Donde Mueren las Palabras* (1946). This film features a 20-minute ballet with an independent storyline, such that it is actually a film within a film. In this section, it is possible to perceive a series of shots conceived as a function of dance. The distance from what is being shot enables a consideration of the choreography in terms of space and time. And, although neither the theatrical stage nor the film’s continuity have been disregarded, there is an incipient bridging of the gap between film and dance oriented toward visual exaltation and an stepping down of the literary narrative.

Shortly thereafter, modern dance began to appear in cinema. Its radically alternative quality in relation to the dance of the moment was evident in the very first film that features that dance, *Marihuana* (1950), in which a choreography by the prestigious dancer Cecilia Ingenieros is used as a metaphor for the narcotic delirium of a drug dependent. Curiously, this episode bred an experimental sequence in the film in which music, dance and visual image became fused beyond the limits of narrative justification.

By the 1960’s, the coming together of dance and the moving image began to emerge from areas distanced from the film environment. In the search for broader aesthetic horizons, choreographers sought to transcend the monotony of the music–dance relationship by exploring new stage possibilities, approaching other contemporary artists –particularly visual artists– and venturing into the use of the possibilities offered by the technologies of the time. All of these elements powerfully converged at the *Di Tella Institute of Buenos Aires*, an institution that promoted avant-garde and experimental works throughout the decade. The institute attracted iconoclastic choreographers who were strongly influenced by the pop aesthetic and who employed humor and a total lack of inhibition to subvert all the current dance postulates. The coexistence of those choreographers with musicians and visual artists working along similar experimental trends, gave rise to the production of works beyond the established norms. In their enthusiasm to explore all the components of the choreographic production, the artists at the *Di Tella Institute* exhausted the stage possibilities of dance representation. The technical resources of the Institute enabled them to experiment with virtual stages created through projections of slides or films onto a large stage background. In this way, Ana Kamien and Marilú Marini created psychedelic backgrounds for *Danse Bouquet* (1967), a production that yielded such a visual impact that elicited the following commentary from a critic of the time: “a show of tremendous intensity and color lacking only in the dancers’ knowledge of how to dance”.

Oscar Aráiz introduced a new element for the use of projected images: the interaction of on-stage dancers with their own virtual representations. In *Crash* (1967), Aráiz experimented with this relationship, presenting images of the dancers at previous, simultaneous or subsequent moments relative to

what their bodies were doing on stage. The following year, the artist expanded his resources to the use of film and light projections onto the bodies of the dancers in his work: *Sinfonía* (1968). These experiments are the immediate antecedents of what we know today as multimedia dance. The work of these pioneers established the foundations for the emergence of other artistic researches almost three decades later, the work of another generation of choreographers equally interested in expanding the stage resources for dance.

In those years Ana Kamien also created, together with the film-maker Marcelo Epstein, the first work that can be considered, in all senses, "dance for the camera", a piece entitled, very simply, *Ana Kamien* (1970). In this film, the stage was completely replaced by a neutral and physical space created through the movements of the camera and the dancer's body. The spatial fragmentation promoted a visual abstraction. Every movement was considered according to the position of the camera; every shot enhanced the movement isolated from a choreography incomprehensible beyond its audiovisual representation. The editing created its own choreography through the fragments of movement: it did not reconstruct a preexisting kinetic organization. For all this, *Ana Kamien* is not only one of the first examples of dance for the camera in Argentina: it is also one of the best.

After the closing of the *Di Tella Institute* in 1970, Argentina no longer had a space of comparable experimental vigor. The years of the military dictatorship were years of creative suppression, ideological persecution and indifference toward artistic production. With the restoration of democracy in 1983, artists began to emerge from the basements and to return from exile, reestablishing a space for aesthetic discussion and investigation favorable for the continuation of movements that had been cut short by the military interlude.

This was the time that gave rise to the resounding success of *Tangos: El Exilio de Gardel* (1985), a film by Pino Solanas about the life of Argentines in exile that received several international awards. The film includes magnificent and splendidly shot tango choreographies by *Nucleodanza*—a company co-founded by Margarita Bali and Susana Tambutti in the years preceding the military coup— that constitutes the true backbone of the film. Here again, the tango is a symbol for national identity. But the aesthetic sensitivity of the film's director translates it into a visual display that demands to be treated accordingly. Visually considered, the tango imposes the elegance of its movement and the wealth of its choreography upon the image. Even though the film is rigidly structured upon a literary narrative—a format that makers of video dance will reject from their very first productions— *Tangos: El Exilio de Gardel* has been one of the most influential films for artists who seek to find an image for dance.

The tango again received this symbolic treatment in a later film, *Cipayos* (1989) by Jorge Coscia. After the Falkland Islands War, Coscia imagined the city of Buenos Aires invaded by the British and a group of resistance fighters who try to recover the city through protests expressed via the tango. The film was not successful with Argentine audiences, but the film's director was a key figure for the emergence and consolidation of dance for the camera as verified in the following decade.

Indeed, in 1993 Jorge Coscia opened the *First Video Dance Workshop for Choreographers*. Among those attending the workshop were the choreographers who promoted the emergence and consolidation of this artistic form: Margarita Bali, Silvina Szperling and Paula De Luque. Silvina Szperling and I founded the *International Video Dance Festival of Buenos Aires* in 1995, earning international citizenship for Argentine production of dance for the camera through the creation of a space for practical-theoretical reflection, diffusion and promotion.

One of the most prolific creators committed to the research of the limits between dance on stage and the audio-visual universe is Margarita Bali. Since her first multimedia work, *Línea de Fuga* (1994) until now, her production has been increasingly growing. In 1994, *Asalto al Patio* won a mention in *Buenos Aires Video*—the most prestigious video art exhibition in Argentina— while her most recent production, *Arena* (1998), was distinguished by one of the main awards in the same competition.

Arena belongs to a series Bali started the previous year with *Agua* (1997) in which the landscape takes a place beside the dancers. Both pieces show continuous conflicts between the dancers and the omnipotence/omnipresence of nature, a translation of the conflict between dancers and stage elements which characterizes the choreographies of the artist; the choreographic design is like a writing on the natural landscape. In these productions, Bali diminishes the importance of editing effects, so dear to her previous works, such as *Asalto al Patio* or *Dos en la Cornisa*. Moreover, she emphasizes the relationships of the dancers with their environment through the framing and highlights the choreographic phrases in the visual sequences.

Temblor (1993) by Silvina Szperling—made up in the aforementioned workshop—is one of the first works in which the references to a pre-existing choreography are clearly diluted. All the dance emerges in the editing of shots based on minimal corporeal movements, inaccessible from the seat of the viewer attending a traditional performance of dance. In contrast with the creations by Margarita Bali, where general shots capturing the relationships between the dancers and their environment predominate, *Temblor* is based on close-ups which generate a space of great intimacy, according to the nudity of the performing bodies and the feminine universe that Szperling is willing to represent.

Paula De Luque, on the other hand, works with preexistent choreographies that she deconstructs during the shooting or in post-production. Some of her works have a cinematographic appearance, such as *El Otro Espejo* (1995); some others are clearly videographic, such as *El Territorio* (1996). In both cases, the organization of the images enhances the underlying dramatic conflicts through a very scrupulous control of composition and editing.

The trend toward the cinematographic treatment of the image, so common in other parts of the world, is quite scarce in Argentine production. Clearly narrative works such as *Espectros* (1995) by Ariel Rotter, or works based on dramatic situations such as *Lo que dice la noche* (1998) by Laura Zenobi, Carolina Chaves, Graciela Devesa and Mónica Ross are exceptional.

Rather more common is the trend toward a plastic visual treatment such as in the case of *Danzagrafía* (1996) by Julio Lascano or *La dote* (1997) by Mario Chierico. But the most outstanding representative of this tendency is video maker Jorge Castro.

Castro departs from the recording of choreographic pieces but with the clear aim of achieving an audio-visual composition in which dance does not occupy a higher place in the hierarchy of sound and visual elements. In his works, the screen is the surface where the video recording meets the infinite possibilities of electronic and digital editing. The rhythm, the color, the formal research and the solid structure which gives cohesion to the whole, stands out. *Tabla esmeralda* (1995), one of his most successful creations, is the visualization of a cyclical universe generated from a dance based on circular movements. Recently, with the incorporation of digital technology, his works are seeking to escape from the effects preestablished by the available software through complex combinations of them. From this research line emerged *R.E.S. (Rastros-espíritu-sedimento)* (1998) and *Albedo: la triple vía del fuego* (1998).

In recent years, the number of multimedia pieces earning critical acclaim has increased significantly. Margarita Bali and Susana Szperling are the main promoters of this kind of production. A recent noteworthy contribution is a series of works by *Grupo UP-PA*, a dance group of indigenous origins (Wichi) using the video to complement their pieces based on native dances. The electronic image functions in their works as a representation of a foreign reality or as a powerful means of communication. The dancers in the group, belonging to a community that maintains very little contact with other people but that has established a fluid relationship with television, found in the electronic image a means for extending the meaning and the symbolism of their dance to viewers outside their culture. The video presents images of a conflict that the dancers represent or re-signifies symbolically. Movement and visual image generate a flow of communication with the viewer that transcends the aesthetic finality of multimedia dance and projects into the territory of cultural exchange.

Lately, some experiments have been oriented toward the use of digital technology. Sabrina Farji and Mariana Belloto took this step into multimedia exploration with the creation of a video dance for the Internet, *Danza Binaria* (1997), in which the segments of a fragmented choreography can be reconstructed by the web-page visitor through the use of a mouse.

These kinds of experiments are still incipient and rudimentary. But insofar as there is a persistent concern for exceeding the formal and conceptual limits of stage productions, dance for the camera—whether analogue or digital, for the film or the computer screen—has a guaranteed future in the fervent environment of Argentine dance.