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Assembling Shreds of History: dance and memory of the last Argentine civic-military dictatorship

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ABSTRACT – Assembling Shreds of History: dance and memory of the last Argentine civic-military dictatorship – The article analyzes the play *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* (2010) choreographed by Daniel Payero for the Compañía Nacional de Danza Contemporánea, and its approach to the memory of the last Argentine civic-military dictatorship (1976-1983). Throughout this analysis, the article offers some thoughts on the embodied memory or the embodiment of the dictatorship's memory as a repertoire or performance. How and what kind of memory do the dancing bodies have and evoke? Here, performance as embodied memory is presented as a fragmentary montage that alters the common place of official memory, allowing an intimate and affective dimension to arise.
Keywords: **Dance. Dictatorship. Memory. Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente. Daniel Payero.**

RÉSUMÉ – Remonter des Lambeaux d'Histoire: la danse et la mémoire de la dictature civique-militaire argentine – L'article analyse l'œuvre *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* (2010) du chorégraphe Daniel Payero, créé pour la Compañía Nacional de Danza Contemporánea, et son approche a la mémoire de la dernière dictature civique-militaire argentine (1976-1983). À partir de cette analyse, l'article propose de réfléchir à la mémoire incarnée ou à la corporisation de la mémoire de la dictature en tant que répertoire ou performance. Comment et quel genre de mémoire les corps dansants évoquent? Ici, la performance en tant que mémoire incarnée se manifeste comme un montage fragmentaire qui modifie le lieu commun de la mémoire officielle, donnant lieu à une dimension intime et affective.
Mots-clés: **Danse. Dictature. Memoire. Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente. Daniel Payero.**

RESUMEN – Re-montar Jirones de Historia: la danza y la memoria de la última dictadura cívico-militar argentina – En este artículo se analiza la obra *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* (2010), del coreógrafo Daniel Payero, creada para la Compañía Nacional de Danza Contemporánea, y su abordaje de la memoria de la última dictadura cívico-militar argentina (1976-1983). A partir de ese análisis, se propone reflexionar acerca de la memoria encarnada o la corporización de la memoria de la dictadura a modo de repertorio o performance. ¿Qué tipo de memoria tienen y evocan los cuerpos danzantes y cómo lo hacen? Aquí, la performance como memoria encarnada se evidencia como un montaje fragmentario que altera el lugar común de la memoria oficial, haciendo surgir una dimensión íntima y afectiva.
Palabras-clave: **Danza. Dictadura. Memoria. Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente. Daniel Payero.**

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The 'Copernican revolution' of history, in Benjamin, would be the passage from the point of view of the past as an objective fact to the past as a memory fact, i.e. a fact in movement, a psychic and material fact (Didi-Huberman, 2011, p. 154-155).

Introduction

On March 24, 1976, in Argentina, a coup-d'état installed the civic-military dictatorship in power until 1983. The Armed Forces defeated the then President María Estela Martínez de Perón and implemented a state terrorism. In other words, to intimidate the population and thus to control it, repression, persecution, assassinations, illegal arrests, torture, disappearance of people, and the appropriation of minors were carried out by the state. The consequences of that terror, as well as the political, economic, social and cultural measures that were taken at that time, echo until the present days. That is why the motto *Nunca más* (Never Again) has been installed in the Argentine society, reaffirming memory and justice for what happened, and as a reaction to forgetfulness policies such as the endpoint and due obedience laws implemented by Raúl Alfonsín in 1986 and 1987, respectively (which ended the trials of the Military Junta that began in 1985); and the pardon by Carlos Menem in 1990.

This fight against oblivion, promoted by different human rights organizations, brought memory to the forefront through different actions such as, for example, the demonstrations, the so-called "*escraches*" in the 1990s, carried out by the Sons and Daughters for Identity, Justice, against Oblivion and Silence (H.I.J.O.S.) organization, or the weekly marches of the Madres of Plaza de Mayo. Likewise, from 2002, the anniversary of the coup d'état (March 24) became the National Day for Memory, Truth and Justice, becoming a national holyday from 2006 during the presidency of Néstor Kirchner.

Artistic production has frequently addressed the memory of the last civic-military dictatorship. There is a vast and varied production of works that consider the theme from literature, cinema, visual arts and theater, both from a *horror narrative* and from a critical perspective. In the first case, we witness a story in which the division between *good* and *bad people* appears didactically shown and empathy with the characters is pursued through the exhibition of the *martyrdom* lived by the *desaparecidos*; an

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example may be the movie *La noche de los lápices* (Night of the Pencils) (1986), by Héctor Olivera. On the other hand, regarding the critical perspective, we see various deconstruction procedures of that first official narrative, many of which constitute insightful procedures on art itself, memory and history. An example of this may be the theater play *Mi vida después* (My Life After) (2009), by Lola Arias, or the films *Los Rubios* (The Blonds) (2003), by Albertina Carri, and *M* (2007), by Nicolás Prividera (for an analysis of these three pieces, see Cadús, 2015).

Nevertheless, there are just a few examples of Argentine concert dance representing the last dictatorship. Some of this pieces are *Dirección obligatoria* (Mandatory Direction) (1983), by Alejandro Cervera, *Dolentango* (Painful Tango) (2001), by Susana Zimmermann, *Serán otros los ruidos* (Noises Will be Other) (2010), by Vivian Luz, *Siempre* (Always) (2006), by Mariana Estévez and Diana Montequin, *Rastros, senderos de la memoria* (Traces, memory paths) (2004), by Gabriela Romero, *Madre e hijo (historia de un pañuelo blanco)* (Mother and Son, the History of a White Scarf) (2009), by Bettina Quintá and Ernesto Chacón Oribe, *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* (Small Pieces/Snippets of Our Most Recent History) (2010), by Daniel Payero –in which this article is focused–, and maybe some other plays that we might be forgetting.

It is no coincidence that these last two works belong to the National Contemporary Dance Company. This ensemble arose from a labor dispute in the Contemporary Ballet of the Teatro San Martín in Buenos Aires City. As a result of that conflict, the dancers involved were dismissed from the official ballet and created another company with the purpose of being national and federal (Heimann; Bousmpoura, 2016). Likewise, and as a consequence of their politicization based on the experience in the conflict with the San Martín Theater, the company was founded with the aim of promoting contemporary dance in society and, as an expression of it, representing its problems, its history and the multiplicity of points of view and, as stated on its website, "Spreading, also, the essential values of communication, democracy, unity, respect, tolerance, sociability, collective work, responsibility, participation and freedom of expression" (Compañía Nacional de Danza Contemporánea, n. d.).

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Thus, the National Contemporary Dance Company was created in 2009 with the support of the then Secretary of Culture of the Presidency of the Argentine Nation, now the Ministry of Culture. It should be pointed out that this creation had the support of the government of the then President Néstor Kirchner, who, in turn, had the human rights policies and state-promoted trials for crimes against humanity as a standard. For all of this, it is not surprising that a year after the first performance as a company, and in the context of the Bicentennial of the May Revolution, in April 2010, the first version[1] of *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* (Small Snippets of Our Most Recent History) was premiered, directed by Daniel Payero.

In this article, we will analyze the second version of the piece, premiered on November 13, 2010, at Teatro Nacional Cervantes. As stated by the dance researcher Victoria Fortuna (2012), in opposition to the great historical narrative of the Historical Artistic Parade organized by the National Government and directed by the Diqui James's company, *Fuerza Bruta*, Payero's work choreographed history in a much smaller scale, in which gestures and movements show an embodied cultural memory, exploring the possibilities of staging the connection and intimacy between the bodies of the past, present and future, which, otherwise, are assigned to normative corporealities. In this sense, the author states that in *Retazos...*, the exploration of physicality facilitates a dialogue between the bodily experiences of the present and the past, offering a kinesthetic ethic of hope, established in the dancing body that uses the social choreography through time (Fortuna, 2012)[2].

According to the statements by Fortuna, Laura Papa (2007, n. p.) considers the memory thematization of the last Argentine civic-military dictatorship by dance, stating that:

> The process of working topics linked to memory by dance implies accessing forms of knowledge from the body and its experience, forms that exceed the verbal order. It involves exploring space as a symbolic field; to get to know the other as a human being with values and rights, among them the value of body freedom, which allows them free individual movement and to build something with their peers; it involves recognizing oneself and the other as a subject with the right to individual and collective creation, in a moment of overcoming limitations. Dance also allows us to go together through

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> situations of search, wait, reunion and absence to access the construction of the historical experience of the struggles of *Madres*, *Abuelas* and family members.

In coincidence with both approaches, this article seeks to provide thoughts on memory, in particular the memory of probably the most traumatic event in recent Argentine history, from the specificity of dance. An issue that, as we pointed out previously, has been rarely worked in both choreography and dance literature – except for the notable and recent book by Fortuna (2019), *Moving Otherwise*. The ability to embody memory through this art and its reception, corporeally and in presence, allows us to approach a physical dimension of the memory of the dictatorship. Thus, we intend to broaden the considerations about common thought topics concerning the dictatorship, such as the spectral, the present and the absent, the living bodies and the disappeared.

In this sense, the article proposes that *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* embodies the dictatorship memory as a *repertoire* (Taylor, 2015). The bodies that we see on stage dialogue with the past with their presence, since there is a *reframing* (Butler, 2010) in this play that dissolves the monument of heroic martyrology present in artworks that represent a horror narrative. This way, the play gives rise to the singularity of the bodies. By means of the *montage* (Didi-Huberman, 2011) the commonplace of the official memory of the events is altered, giving rise to an intimate dimension, as can be seen at the end of the play, when the dancers kiss and hug each other.

Throughout this article, we will develop this argument. In the first section, we will explain how we understand the dialogue between past and present based on corporeality. In addition, we will define memory and how it can be reclaimed from the repertoire. Then, in the second section, we will develop a detailed critical analysis of the play, articulating and exemplifying the concepts.

Before Repertoire and Its Representation of Memory

Georges Didi-Huberman (2011, p. 39) states for visual arts that when we are before an image, we are before an object of complex and impure time, "an outstanding *montage of heterogeneous times that create*

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anachronisms" [italics by the author]. This is more important in dance because it is about present bodies moving here and now, each one with their history and with a certain cultural history, each one with a repertoire. In dance, when we say *before time*, we are also saying *before the flesh*, the embodied time. Following Performance Studies researcher Rebecca Schneider's thinking, in archival logic the flesh is what sneaks away, keeping no memory of the bone, which would represent the tangible, material documents of the archive. However, in cultural practices, performance leaves residues in the flesh, in a transmission network of body to body representation through generations (Schneider, 2011).

In this sense, Diana Taylor states that understanding performance multivocally as a learning, storage, and transmission of knowledge system, Performance Studies would allow us to expand our idea of knowledge. Taylor advocates for a shift in the focus from writing to *embodied culture* and, thus, modifying our methodologies. It is a political question, since, if the performance is not capable of transmitting knowledge, then only the literati and, therefore, those who hold power, could claim memory, history and social identity. Thus, a distinction that we consider central appears: archive and performance or, in Taylor's well-known terms, archive and repertoire.

By definition, an archive is made of documents from materials that are supposedly resistant to change, it exceeds the living and is strictly related to power structure, since, etymologically, the word "archive" (from the Greek *arkhe*) refers to the house of the archons, a public building where records were kept, and that also refers the beginning of government. On the other hand, the repertoire acts as body memory, usually conceived as ephemeral and unreproducible knowledge. Etymologically, it is

> […] 'a treasure, an inventory', which also allows individual agency, relative to 'the seeker, the discoverer', and a meaning 'to discover'. The repertoire requires presence, people participating in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there' and being part of that transmission. Contrary to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that form the repertoire do not remain unchanged. The repertoire preserves, while transforming, the choreographies of meaning (Taylor, 2015, p. 49).

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Although the archive and the repertoire constantly interact, being both sources of relevant information, and since each one encompasses the limitations of the other, the usual practice has been to highlight the archive and relegate the repertoire to the past. However, the repertoire manages to convey embodied live actions, here and now, for a living audience, thereby achieving that the expressions of the past can be experienced as present. Thus, dance is a powerful and privileged artistic language for the representation of memory through the repertoire, being able to capture in the bodies, gestures and choreographic movements what is neglected by the archive culture, such as affects, emotions, the singular, the intimate.

How to execute such representation? How to represent the last Argentine dictatorship events? How to represent what would seem unrepresentable due to horror? French philosopher Paul Ricoeur explains in his book *Memory, History, Forgetting* that the word "representation" is intrinsically linked to memory, that is to say, remembering is already representing.

> [Representation] Designates, first of all, the great enigma of memory, concerning the Greek problem of *eikôn* and its embarrassing pair *phantasma* or *phantasia*; […] The mnemonic phenomenon consists in the presence in the mind of an absent thing that, in addition, no longer is but was. Whether simply evoked as a presence and for this reason as *phatos*, or actively sought in the operation of remembrance, final conclusion of the recognition experience, the memory is representation, re-presentation (Ricoeur, 2013, p. 245).

As we stated above, there is a "horror narrative" of the dictatorship that builds monument martyrs. This is a representation that is consistent with the archive culture which is an attempt to tell the "real" events as they "happened," solidifying versions, crystallizing meaning. This way, monuments are created. Historian Jacques Le Goff in his book *History and Memory* defines monuments as signs of the past, as everything that can bring us back to the past, something that can perpetuate memory. "The Latin word *monumentum* is linked to the Indo-European root *men* which expresses one of the fundamental functions of the mind (*mens*), memory (*memini*). The verb *monere* means 'to remind', from where 'to warn', 'to illuminate', 'to instruct'" (Le Goff, 1991, p. 227).

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On the other hand, a new frame[3] can be suggested to analyze history with which to move away from that official narrative and offer other points of view. The document can be discussed, questioned by being mistrustful of it, in order to have a critical gaze. It should be pointed out that Le Goff stated that the document is a monument, since it is the result of the effort of societies or, better said, of those who retained power in them, to impose a given image of themselves in the future. Therefore, according to the author, there is no *truth-document*, but "Every document is a lie. It is up to the historian [in this case the artist] not to have pretenses of naivety" (Le Goff, 1991, p. 238). Furthermore, by embodying – making flesh – that memory, other dimensions of history that have no place in documentary/monumental logocentrism can be included. Although we are aware that the archive culture can also be reproduced from the body, we suggest it as potency, a possibility to return to the repertoire and put it in dialogue with the established memory, with the documents, as it happens, for example, in the scenes of *Retazos...* that we will describe in the next section.

Assembling the Repertoire of the Last Argentine Civic-Military Dictatorship

Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente (Small Snippets of Our Most Recent History) is presented from the title itself as a delimited, non-totalizing and intimate frame. Payero does not intend to objectively represent the complete history of the last Argentine dictatorship – or *recent history* –; on the contrary, he states of his point of view and tries to tell only a few *small snippets*. As Didi-Huberman points out, according to Benjamin, the historian is like a child who plays with time shreds – snippets – (Didi-Huberman, 2011, p. 164). This is equivalent to saying that history is not made by going to the past and gathering facts and knowledge from there, but that the movement that must be done to recover the past is complex, dialectical, it is a movement made of leaps, which responds to a tension of things, times and the psyche (Didi-Huberman, 2011). Moreover, the title already states the intimate and singular character of the bodies by not representing *The History* of Argentina, but *our history*, that one of that inclusive plural first person. This can also be understood as a statement regarding the ideal audience of the piece: this is not a play for others, to

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explain the suffering of the Argentine people abroad, but a play that invites us to think together about our most recent history.

Retazos…, in the version that we are analyzing in this writing, is a play for 10 dancers, five men and five women[4]. Likewise, the only objects in the decor have an important role: 10 wooden chairs, whose role we will describe throughout the analysis, but that we consider to be primarily a sign of absence. The 10 chairs double the ten dancers and, although at times they are used as props, in other moments they oppose the physical presence of the dancers, the chairs represent what is unrepresentable except through emptiness.

The music of the play was in charge of Gastón García. It includes songs by Chango Spasiuk, Raúl Barbosa, Víctor Heredia, Tránsito Cocomarola, Eustaquio Vera, Chacho Ruiz Guiñazú, and Arpas Guaraní. This folk music evokes the Argentine provinces instead of the capital city, whose traditional music would be the *tango* and *milonga*. This way, *Retazos…* makes a *reframing* (Butler, 2010) of the dictatorship – and, why not, of Argentine history – established history, whose center is usually Buenos Aires. Here, a federal *us* is targeted, just as the company itself intends. Remember that we are referring to the National Contemporary Dance Company. Thus, throughout the play the dance movement belongs to languages of the so-called *contemporary dance*, particularly neoclassical movements and others from the *release* and *flying low* techniques. Nevertheless, some movements created and chosen for the specific play are discernible, a particular language that they use throughout the piece and that we will describe in this section.

The play starts with a female solo with music by Spasiuk. The curtain rises and we see a line of fallen chairs. Only one, the last one on the left side (from the audience's point of view) is standing. There, the female dancer sits, head down, meditative, and then she throws herself onto the apron – the closest place to the audience in an Italian theater stage such as the Cervantes – and after the curtain goes down again, she dances. Now, she continues her meditation as a dance soliloquy. The movements she performs are softs, undulating, continuous, and many of them arise from the center towards the periphery of her body, from the torso towards the extremities, movements that, historically in dance, refer to the subject's

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interiority expression. Her solo also includes the spoken word: she says names, the names of those not on stage, those of the other dancers. As it is done in demonstrations such as March 24, the naming of those who are not present, who are disappeared, evokes their presence[5]: they are represented, in Ricoeur's (2013) terms.

Then, these continuous movements become smaller and smaller, until another kind of movement begins and, along with this, a different music. The curtain rises and this dance becomes a female dancer's unison, while on the counterpart of the stage the chairs take the place of the *others*. The dancers will inhabit this space and dance with the chairs, alternating in groups that enter and leave the scene. Until, finally, the entire company is on stage dancing under a blue light. The female dancers are also dressed in blue tones, with simple dresses. On the other hand, the male dancers wear black pants, a T-shirt and a gold vest. It seems that both the lighting and their clothing alluded to the colors of the Argentine flag (light blue, white and a golden sun). The dancers sit on the chairs and alternate dancing in unison and duets with partnering work, that is, with physical contact between them, for support, balance, and even affective hugs.

Then, everyone returns to their chairs and they begin to make faster and more rigid movements, in partnering with their chairs in which the chairs seem to determine the quality of movement –no longer continuous and rhythmic, like the one danced with their human colleagues, but fast and rigid like the object itself. The dancers move the chairs around the stage and sit firmly on them. The chairs seem to indicate and constrain them to an order in which they must be sitting, motionless. Finally, everyone brings their chairs to the back of the stage and places them in a straight line. They sit down, drop their torsos on their legs, motionless, dejected, while the blackout occurs. And although one of them resists, jumping and extending his legs and arms, he finally falls too.

Chamamé music starts playing again and the dancers are on stage, siting but now in different ways (for example, with one foot or both on the chairs). They start their unison and duets dance again, with soft and continuous movements. I would like to point out the moments of duo work in which you can see the intimate encounter, from a handshake or a hug; and also the pendulous hip movement that is repeated in the play, a

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movement that stands out from the rest –Apollonian, rational, stylized– evoking the roots and the popular or social dances. I consider that, in the former, physical contact with the other is evoked as a repertoire from affects. In the latter, in addition to the social dance mood that links the movements of the dancers with the people, there is an erotic dimension that hip movement can entail. In both cases, the pleasure of the body is called in opposition to the dictatorship norms in which the bodies were repressed, tortured and organized, for example, by prohibiting meetings, that is, the encounter with others.

Gradually, the lights go down and a new character appears. He wears a black overcoat and dark glasses. He walks straight across the stage, side to side, and finally sits down in one of the chairs. The female dancers on stage hug or caress their partners and leave the scene. Then, slowly, they also leave the stage. Meanwhile, in the background, the text of the *Comunicado n.º 1* (Communication Number 1) of the Military Junta, released on March 24, 1976, is projected in white letters on a black background:

> The population is informed that effective immediately, the country is declared under the operational control of the General Commanders of the Armed Forces. It is recommended that all residents strictly obey the regulations and directives of military authority, both security and police, and maximize caution to avoid individual or group actions that may demand drastic intervention by active duty personnel.

At the same time, the dancer wearing the black overcoat starts his solo. The light is dim and only illuminates him. He walks firmly through the scene, moving his arms with determination and rigidity, pretending to give a speech (Figure 1). The sound is certainly a speech that seems to be in German, although it is not. These are the words of the *Comunicado* altered by a sound montage. Although the words have the same order in the sentence, the letters of each word are not, thus seeking the effect of similarity to the German language (Fortuna, 2012). This creates a comparison between the Argentine dictatorship and the Nazi regime. However, as Fortuna says, while promoting comparisons between authoritarianisms, it also emphasizes that one is not reducible to the other. "It calls into question what sounds disciplinary at the same time that the disorganization of the words deflates their performative disciplinary authority" (Fortuna, 2012).

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Figure 1 – The character that represents authoritarianism gives his danced speech. Photographer: Marcelo Ragone.

At this point, there is a sound montage, altering the commonplace of the official memory of the events. Through a document (the *Comunicado n.º 1*) disassembly procedure, other meanings are created that allow estrangement and, therefore, the distance that would allow a critical understanding of history. Let's recall that according to Didi-Huberman's definition of montage, following Benjamin's thought, montage is a procedure that requires a prior disassembly, a dissociation of what was built and that, this way, reassembles, in the sense of remembrance (to assemble the memory) and structural recomposition (reassemble the disassembled) (Didi-Huberman, 2011). Thus, the described scene stages another frame through montage. The frame of authoritarianism beyond frontiers and on the other hand, the parody of that same authoritarianism. As Didi-Huberman (2011, p. 174) points out: "To recast history in a movement 'against the grain' is to bet on *knowledge by montage* that makes of *not knowing* – the appeared, original, turbulent, faltering, symptomatic image – the object and the heuristic moment of its very constitution" [italics by the author].

After finishing his speech, the character takes off his glasses and becomes part of the group, which returns to the stage. Now everyone is dressed in a black overcoat and tied hair, uniformed. They begin an abrupt movement choreography, almost *robotic* movements, accompanied with a

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speedy and frenzied music. The gesture that we would like to highlight at this moment, as part of the dictatorship's repertoire, is the gesture of signaling (Figure 2). The dancers frequently perform the gesture of pointing with the finger, thus embodying the memory of the bodies under continuous surveillance during the dictatorship, as well as the denunciation acts by fellow citizens. The *normalized* bodies memory is represented here through the change of clothing and by the rigid and mechanical movements that they repeat until all become *puppets*, as can be seen in this choreography final pose: dancers stay with arms raised and hands hanging as if they had threads from which they are suspended, the dancers fold their torso towards their legs (Figure 3).

Figure 2 – Pointing gesture. Photographer: Alejandra Aranda.

Figure 3 – The normalized bodies became puppets.
Source: Still image from the audiovisual register of *Retazos…*

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We choose to speak of these bodies as "normalized" for two reasons. First, during the 1976 dictatorship – as well as in other authoritarian regimes – institutions were frequently intervened to carry out a *normalization* process[6]. Secondly, we can understand the term in the Foucauldian sense according to which the norm is linked to discipline and biopolitics, that is, to biopower –as the power over life and death –, the power that has individuals as its objective, the power that is implemented on populations. A distinction is made between normal and pathology and a normalization system is imposed, over behaviors, affects, work, sexuality, health, etc. It is the governmentalization of biological life, that is, of human as a living being, and the normalization is the process of regulating individuals and populations lives (Castro, 2004).

To continue with the analysis of *Retazos…*, after the normalized bodies' choreography, a female dancer appears, walking on the chairs that are still in a line at the back of the stage. She has loose hair and wears a black lace dress that contrasts with the opaque and covered by the overcoat dancers. She runs between them and starts an ecstatic dance. Women leave the stage and men stand motionless, performing as partners for the soloist. But this partnering work is different from the others since there is no physical contact as a moment of intimacy and affection, but the dancers continue performing their *normalized* role and, when they hold the female dancer, they do it rigidly, while she shakes as if wanting to free herself from them, although, at first, she was the one who threw herself into their arms.

Then, the stage darkens, remaining in semidarkness, while the dancers leave her alone on the scene. She continues her ecstatic dance, in which she shakes her loose hair, she contorts, jumps, kicks, runs hunching, spins, and moves her pelvis –although at times she also makes *normalized* movements such as pointing. Her dance seems to be that of a bacchante, of a witch, or perhaps of death itself, or, on the contrary, of freedom that is fighting against oppression. In fact, some movements of her arms and hands, that look like claws, recall the emblematic *Witch Dance I and II – Hexentanz –* (1914/1926), by the German dancer Mary Wigman (Figure 4). This dancer, choreographer, and teacher was one of the icons of the *Ausdruckstanz* or German expression dance. Her *Witch Dance* is analyzed by Susan Manning (2010) as demonic and ecstatic, as an echo of German

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romanticism, that is, as a channel for nature irrational forces. At this moment of the play, this characterization can represent, as repertoire, that, against the vigilance that produces bodies that we have called *normalized* – rational, disciplined, and objectifiable bodies–, there is this other body that irrationally dances struggling against the regime. The audience find themselves *before the flesh* that represents these forces of the time: oppression *versus* freedom.

Figure 4 – *Witch Dance II* (on the left) and the quoted scene from *Retazos…* (on the right).
Source: Still images from the audiovisual register of the play.

As the dancer continues her solo, the lights slightly light up the stage, allowing us to see, on the chairs, the figures of five dancers, still, blindfolded, naked, and with their hands covering their genitals, thus representing in a direct and mimetic way the *desaparecidos*. Although this is a representation closer to the documentary/monumental history (Le Goff, 1991), the fact that they are seen vaguely, almost like the blink of an eye, takes away their notoriety. They are like memory-images that return to the scene in a flashing but explicit way. As Ricoeur (2013) explains, the image-memory is between the re-inscribed in perception memory and the pure memory. The Bergsonian conception of the transition from *pure memory* (not yet configured in images) to image-memory is explained in the *working memory movement*, which takes the memory to an area of presence similar to that of perception. This way, it is not just any image that is mobilized, but

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what is exalted is its way of showing. It is an imagination that makes you see. It is the ostensive function of imagination, according to Ricoeur (2013). Therefore, this disappeared detainees' memory-image, due to the way it is shown, could be closer to the perception – that is, to the *repertoire* – than to the consolidated archives of the past.

Finally, the ecstatic dancer also falls as a puppet. She gets up slowly and makes a gesture – with her back to the audience – as if exclaiming a silent scream in front of the other dancers, who look at her, and then she runs away leaving the stage. The dancers cover their ears and start their dance. Now the women are wearing their dresses and loose hair again and the men, black pants, although they show their naked torso or wear a black sleeveless shirt. Two female dancers perform a unison while the others slowly surround them with their chairs until finally, they fall to the ground, the others sit with their backs to them and another dancer suddenly moves into the center of the circle. He performs a solo in which he mainly uses his straight arm (as if pointing but without extending the finger) to drive the movement; as if that arm's rigidity made him move in this way, that is, as if the oppressive and normalizing gestures conditioned his movements, his body.

Subsequently, the music starts and, with it, a men trio in the center of the circle perform a dance characterized by undulating movements and partnering where affection and intimacy are shown in those gestures of support, giving weight and sharing their axis. The other dancers watch them; female dancers from the chairs around them. They begin to form a central figure, leaning on their bodies as a base. One of the dancers stands up and raises his fist up high, like a statue. Meanwhile, the female dancers have begun to walk in a circle around them, while removing their dresses, remaining in underwear (Figure 5). Here, the gesture can refer to the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* walking around the May Pyramid monument, as a way of demonstrating and claiming for the appearance of their children. However, this *Homeland* (the May Pyramid) is not a woman nor does it have other weapons except its raised fist (a sign of struggle). And these *mothers* only maintain the symbolic gesture of walking around. Again, the official memory commonplace of the events is turned, since the monument (both the statue and the *Madres* themselves) is not mimetically represented,

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but can be inferred from the gesture of walking around, that is, from the body and the movement, its choreography. However, its connotation of struggle is represented by another historically recognizable gesture (the raised fist).

Figure 5 – Women walking around the *statue* in the making.
Source: Still image from the audiovisual register of *Retazos…*

After a dance of three mixed duets (that is to say, duets of a man and a woman), the dancers once again stand in a circle, standing in front of the chairs, watching another dancer perform a solo in the center. The solo is accompanied by a series of metallic, footstep, door, knocking, and helicopter sounds. As for the movement, he uses again the gesture of pointing with his finger (a *leitmotif* that returns as the dictatorial oppression repertoire), as well as rigid, abrupt movements. He also crawls, shows his arms behind his back as if tied, and spins around using one foot as a base and turning without moving it. Finally, he falls, squatting, covering his head, and the other dancers retreat, leaving their chairs at the back of the stage again. As Fortuna (2012) points out, this dancer's movements and the sounds refer to the terror of the detentions.

This scene is immediately counteracted by the peaceful music of Spasiuk, Mercedes Sosa and Víctor Heredia performing *Sólo para mí* and the entrance of another dancer –Payero himself– who hugs the first one. Together they start a duet with partnering work in which, once again, the sensitivity of physical, affective, human contact is present (Figure 6).

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Another men duo enters, while the first continue walking at the back of the stage as if they were going to encounter each other by a tightrope until they find themselves in a hug that is emptied due to the fall of one of them. And then, there is a blackout.

Figure 6 – Payero and Pablo Fermani duet. Payero embraces and support the weight of his partner. Photographer: Alejandra Aranda.

Still in the dark, the audio begins. It is the de facto president Jorge Videla's well-known cynical speech in which he gave his explanation of the disappeared. In September 1979, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights visited Argentina and met with Videla, due to international complaints about the violation of those rights during the dictatorship. A few months later, Videla had a press conference in which he gave his infamous definition of the disappeared when asked by the journalist José Ignacio López:

> With a Christian vision of human rights, life is fundamental, freedom is important, as is work, family, home, etc. etc. Argentina attends to human rights in this comprehensive manner. I speak concretely because I know that your question refers not to this comprehensive vision of human rights, that the Pope referred generically, but specifically to the man who is detained without process, that is one case, or the disappeared person, which is another. In the case of a disappeared person, it is an unknown. If the person appears, ok, he or she will have X treatment, and if the disappearance becomes proof of the person's death then the person will have Z treatment. But while the person is disappeared neither he nor

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she can have any special treatment, the person is an unknown, disappeared, without entity, not here, neither alive nor dead, disappeared.

Immediately after, the sound montage begins, repeating and superimposing the last sentences: "any special treatment," "is an unknown," "is disappeared," "without entity," "not here," "neither alive nor dead," "is disappeared."

Meanwhile, the male dancer who had been left alone in his embrace continues with his empty hugging gesture until he embraces himself and leaves the scene. Three couples enter the stage – a man and a woman, and two pairs of women – who hug and dance in duets. This way, the image of presence and affection appears as opposed to the discourse that denies lives. Through the sound montage, as well as the montage between sound and image (as an antagonistic superposition), the bodies' repertoire criticizes the document of the archive. Then, the women gather together and look at the audience as if they were searching something while they go backwards, saying excerpts from the interviews with the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* that we will quote later, until they sit in the chairs at the back of the stage.

A solo starts. The male dancer moves with his arms stretched to the sides like the wings of an airplane. The body refers to the memory of the *death flights* although he dances with soft violin music. Immediately that sense is highlighted by the sound of water that replaces the music. However, the sign of the *death flights* is immediately displaced, since the dancer leaves the stage with the same gesture through the imaginary tightrope that he walked before. Now the gesture of gliding becomes that of extending the arms to balance. Choreographic montage here proposes the gesture of the arms extended to the sides' polysemy, the contrast between death horror and balancing on a tightrope to endure those Argentine history difficult moments.

In the meantime, the women have started a group choreography with the chairs in a semicircle open to the audience. Their movements disassemble simple actions as standing, walking, and a punch to the abdomen (the uterus). Thus, the female dancers use these ordinary gestures, distancing and choreographing them. Movements refer again to the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*. This is going to be made explicit through sound, a

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montage of the interview with the *Madres* during their first demonstration on April 30, 1977:

> – They won't tell us if they are alive, if they are dead. Why don't they tell us? We are looking for this, nothing more. That they answer us, nothing more, then we leave.
> – What the government says is not that it tells lies, it just lies, it lies. We've been two years, we've been like this for two years.
> – My daughter was five months pregnant when they took her. My grandson must have been born in August last year. I still don't know anything about him.
> – We only want to know where our children are, dead or alive. Anguished, because we don't know if they are sick, cold, hungry, we don't know anything. And we are desperate, Mister, because we don't know who to appeal to. Consulates, embassies, ministries, churches, doors have been closed to us everywhere. So, we beg you. You are our last hope. Please help us! Help us, please! You are our last hope.

Female dancers continue their choreography along with the voices of the *Madres* but they slowly quieten down. Three of them are lying on the floor, and one on a chair; another dancer walks slowly into the gloom at the back of the stage, dragging her chair; and the last one (the one that danced the solo at the beginning of the play) remains seated, looking at the audience. While the male dancers move the chairs and help the fallen female dancers to get up and leave the stage, the last female dancer performs a short solo.

The scene illuminates and three female dancers take the place of the first one, repeating fragments of the first women's unison. Then, with three men, they repeat other movement sequences from the beginning of the play. Finally, the entire company set in duets dances on stage past fragments of the piece; they collect movement sequences, disassembling and reassembling them: the undulating, continuous, smooth movements and the affective contact movements between partners. Also, everyone has the same clothing as at the beginning.

Gradually, the light goes down while they continue their memory of the play choreography. The chairs are *disorderly* grouped on one side of the stage and two of them begin to elevate. The dancers break with the duet structure and mix them, standing on the opposite side of the chairs, and look at them (Figure 7). They continue their dance that restages fragments

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of the play's repertoire, such as the puppet movements. Dancers walk among them, gently touching each other with their hands, including the chairs in the scene by looking at them until they regroup in diverse couples (man and woman, woman and woman, and man and man) and finally they kiss and hug each other until the stage is covered by blue light and the curtain falls.

Figure 7 – Opposition presence/absence. Source: Still image from the audiovisual register of *Retazos…*

In this last scene, the chairs represent absence. They have their restricted space on stage opposite the dancers' corporeal presence, and they form a group, just like the performers. The chairs represent absence by doubling presence. Moreover, two of them rise, levitating like specters. As Jacques Derrida explains, the spectrum

> *Is* something that, precisely, is not known and no one knows whether it precisely *is*, whether it exists, whether it responds to any name and corresponds to any essence. It is not *known*: not because of ignorance, but because that non-object, that present not present, that being-there of an absent or a disappeared no longer depends on knowledge [emphasis by the author] (Derrida, 1995, p. 20).

This spectrum haunts us as a community. Absence disturbs, provokes the imagination. It leaves traces of its presence. That is why the dancers, although imbued in their choreography, cannot avoid observing the chairs.

On the other hand, we would like to focus on the intimate and affective dimension in which the play ends. Flesh/performance/repertoire prevails over the narrative of the bones, of the document/monument, first

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reassembling the fragments of the play itself and then through the appearance of affection. The subject's sensitivity emerges above the archive culture memory; it becomes present in scenic opposition to the spectral absence represented by the chairs, which, in any case, haunts the present bodies (Figure 8).

Figure 8 – The play finale. Photographer: Marcelo Ragone.

Final Words

Daniel Payero's *Retazos pequeños de nuestra historia más reciente* (Small Snippets of Our Most Recent History) does not intend to be a play that covers the entire history of the last civic-military dictatorship. On the contrary, it aims to be an intimate corporeal memory. The history frame proposes to give voice to these *precarious lives* – using Butler's (2010) concept – rather than denying them. This way, the subject and his/her affects appear instead of the martyrs, heroes and villains from the official history. The flesh, the repertoire appears, instead of the bones, the archive. Those residues left by cultural practices in the bodies – which are usually believed to be lost, since they sneak away unlike the tangible matter of the archive – are recovered as snippets. As Benjamin says, "[...] the rags, the waste (*die Lumpen, den Abfall*): I am not going to inventory those but just

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appreciate them in the only possible way: using them [...]" (Benjamin *apud* Didi-Huberman, 2011, p. 175).

Likewise, in front of the document/monument, the estrangement that the montage promotes is offered, thereby generating knowledge, allowing a critical reading.

> Montage appears as an operation of historical knowledge insofar as it also characterizes the object of this knowledge: the historian reassembles the "wastes" because they have in themselves the double capacity to *disassemble* history and to *assemble* the set of heterogeneous times, Past Time with Now, survival with symptom, latency with crisis [italics by the author] (Didi-Huberman, 2011, p. 175).

Montage takes over the scene, since we not only refer to the sound montages that are more evident, but to the narration itself which is given by the montage, by memory, by the re-presentation of different images, sensations, affects, without a necessary standard continual narrative (exposition-climax-denouement). History is disassembled to reassemble the shreds of time and represent through the corporeal repertoire the memory of the last Argentine civic-military dictatorship.

Notes

[1] This was a reduced version, premiered by the National Contemporary Dance Company on April 23, 2010, in Salta city, with the dancers Luciana Benosilio, Diego Franco, Daniel Payero, and Victoria Viberti.

[2] In addition to the aforementioned article, Fortuna conducts a thoughtful study of the Argentine contemporary dance and its links to the memory of recent political events in her book *Moving Otherwise* (2019).

[3] We use here the concept of frame as widely developed by Judith Butler in her book *Frames of War*. We would like to quote the following thought: "The frame that aims to contain, convey and determine what is seen (and sometimes, for a good period of time, achieves just what it claims) depends on the reproducibility conditions regarding its success. However, this same reproducibility entails a constant break with the context, a constant delimitation of a new context, which means that the «frame» does not entirely contain what it transmits, but it breaks every time it tries to give a definitive organization to its content. In other words, that the frame does not hold

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everything together in one place but itself becomes a kind of perpetual break, submitted to a temporal logic by which it passes from one place to another. As the frame constantly breaks with its context, this self-breaking becomes part of its own definition, which leads us to a different way of understanding both the effectiveness of the frame and its vulnerability to investment, subversion, and even its critical instrumentalization. What is taken for granted in one case is critically or even incredulously thematized in another case. This changing temporal dimension of the frame also constitutes the possibility and the trajectory of its affect" (Butler, 2010, p. 26).

[4] Dancers were: Luciana Benosilio, Juan Cid, Pablo Fermani, Diego Franco, Victoria Hidalgo, Virginia López, Ernesto Chacón Oribe, Daniel Payero, Bettina Quintá, Victoria Viberti.

[5] The usual phrase is "X (name) X (surname)!" "Present!" – replies the crowd. Or in the generic case: "30.000 detained disappeared companions!" "Present!"

[6] Although institutions normalization has also been carried out by democratic governments, here we refer only to the authoritarian intervention mode of adaptation of the institutions to their criteria. We are aware that in both historical contexts the word acquires different meanings. That is why we will refer only to the authoritarian meaning by the dictatorship, as a legal legitimation process of its norms and moral. Furthermore, we understand the term in a complex manner, as we explain following Michel Foucault's thinking.

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