



# Documentary on the process of creation in dance: history(ies) and memory(ies) of the body in movement

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**ABSTRACT – Documentary on the process of creation in dance: history(ies) and memory(ies) of the body in movement(s)** – This article intend to think on a singular perspective of historical production of/about dance. It is from an interdisciplinary relationship, which involves dance and cinema, that the documentary *A Alma do Gesto* (2020) is take as an axis and empirical object of investigation in order to analyze creation processes in a dance company as the production of a narrative memorial on gesture and body in motion mediated by digital technology. This study draws on authors who deal with process criticism, memorial archives, history, documentaries and *mise-en-scène* as a basis for rethinking and deduce that, here, primary documentary sources are crossed by dance fiction.

Keywords: **Dance. Documentary. History. Memory. Creation process.**

**RÉSUMÉ – Documentaire sur le processus de création en danse: histoire(s) et mémoire(s) du corps en mouvement(s)** – Cet article entend réfléchir sur une perspective unique de la production historique de / sur la danse. C'est à partir d'une relation interdisciplinaire, qui implique la danse et le cinéma, que le documentaire *A Alma do Gesto* (2020) est pris comme axe et objet empirique d'investigation pour analyser le processus de création dans une compagnie de danse comme la production d'un mémorial narratif sur le geste et le corps en mouvement médiatisés par la technologie numérique. L'ancre théorique est basée sur des auteurs qui traitent de la critique de processus, des archives mémorielles, de l'histoire, du documentaire et de la mise en scène, comme base pour repenser et conclure que, ici, les sources documentaires primaires sont traversées par la fiction de danse.

**Mots-clés: Danse. Documentaire. Histoire. Mémoire. Processus de création.**

**RESUMO – Documentário sobre o processo de criação em dança: história(s) e memória(s) do corpo em movimento** – Este artigo pretende refletir sobre uma perspectiva singular de produção histórica de/sobre dança. É a partir de uma relação interdisciplinar, que envolve a dança e o cinema, que o documentário *A Alma do Gesto* (2020) é tomado como eixo e objeto empírico de investigação para analisar o processo de criação em uma companhia de dança como produção de uma narrativa memorial sobre o gesto e o corpo em movimento mediado por tecnologia digital. A ancoragem teórica se apoia em autores que tratam de crítica de processo, arquivo memorial, história, documentário e *mise-en-scène*, como base para se repensar e concluir que, aqui, as fontes documentais primárias são atravessadas pela ficção dançante.

Palavras-chave: **Dança. Documentário. História. Memória. Processo de criação.**

## Introduction

*“We live the image in our daily lives, in various dimensions, uses and purposes.”*

Ulpiano Meneses

It is possible to observe the polysemic discourse of the image evidenced in its massive informational presence in our daily lives, as suggested by Meneses:

The use of images as a source of [historical] information is just one among many (including simultaneously with other uses) and does not change the nature of the thing itself, but it occurs effectively in specific cultural situations, among many others. The same image, therefore, can be repurposed, assume various roles, acquire new meanings and produce a variety of effects... (Meneses, 2003, p. 29).

The camera's gaze and the documentary filming of events, bodies and dances acquire, in our times, multiple roles and allow the production of diverse effects that point to discussions about representation, presence, co-presence, staging, reality and fiction. I believe that different audiovisual approaches and methods of recording can contribute to the field of History and Historiography, especially with regard to histories in and of dance.

Also according to Meneses, images should be understood as varieties of historical statements originated in social interactions and employed according to a specific spatiotemporal context. Meneses assumes that images are *visual things* serving various purposes, among which possible documentary purposes that are of great interest to the investigation presented in this paper.

In fact, to find fault with the proposition that images should be disregarded as historical evidence, because they would be history itself, and instead of mutually exclusive alternatives to propose retaining both masks the need to take visual things primarily as *things*, which can be employed for a wide variety of uses – among which *documentary* ones, depending on the situation and not due to its essence or original purpose (Meneses, 2003, p. 29, emphasis added).

Given the possibility that an “audiovisual thing/object” lends itself to various uses – ethical, aesthetic and documentary – I wonder: could a documentary film be considered a unique record of a dance creation process and producer of a – historical and memorial – narrative discourse about the body dancing? Could a documentary serve as a primary source on indicial strategies about the routine of a dance company – classes, rehearsals, shows, bodies, creation space, methods and choreographic aesthetics? Could the text/document that narrates – the reality crossed by the fictional nature of the documentary *mise-en-scène* – the history of the dance, the movement and the iconic gesture incorporated into the dance company members’ bodies be considered a particular kind of historical-body-graphic writing constituted in/by the cinematographic language?

Taking these research questions as a starting point, my aim is to undertake a reflective and analytical investigation of the staging of a historical event – the *documentary filmic thing/object A Alma do Gesto* (the soul of the gesture) (2020), by Eduardo Tulio Baggio and Juslaine Abreu Nogueira – dwelling on excerpts from this documentary that stages a memorial approach to the Téserra Dance Company, from Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR), based on the record of the creation process of *Black Dog* (2016), a show by director and choreographer Rafael Pacheco. The studies and theoretical propositions of Cecília Almeida Salles (2000; 2006; 2010; 2013), as well as concepts by Jean-Louis Comolli (2008), Bill Nichols (2005; 2012) and Fernão Pessoa Ramos (2005; 2008; 2018) are essential to my line of reasoning, which rests on the privileged role of the documentary as a record of a history and stories about dance.

I start from the observation that different records “[...] do not necessarily use in their making the same code through which the work will materialize” (Salles, 2000, p. 39) and that what is presented, “[...] when necessary, are translated or transposed to other codes” (Salles, 2006, p. 95). In this sense, the documentary film selected for this investigation, woven with a language made of sounds and images, is a record and a report of dance, but not a translation of it in the sense of a spontaneous reconfiguration of the gesture. By containing/making a historical account, I believe that the documentary

can generate and stage “[...] a past, organize the heterogeneous material of facts to create a reason in the present [...] manufacture an object and stage a story” (Certeau, 1982 p.13-16 apud Cunha, 2008, p. 30). The current challenges of the production of history and historiographies of and in dance are still permeated by questions posed by historians who, long ago, realized that narrating history is not the same as reproducing what actually happened, but rather to “[...] represent it from a particular point of view” (Burke, 1992, p. 337).

Thus, from the perspective of representation and staging, a particular point of view – documentary *mise-en-scène* – will also be examined here as a crucial point to understand how a narrative about the process of creation in dance – in a company that has a 40-year investigative, formative and artistic history – is capable of organizing and transmitting a particular type of environment/space/time of historical (re)presentation through the camera’s gaze: a “camera within the reach of those filmed by it, an object close to their bodies, a tactile presence [...]” (Comolli, 2008, p. 55).

It is not, therefore, about narrating the history of the 40-years-old UFPR Dance Company with a focus on certain works from its repertoire, the biography of its resident directors and choreographers, situating it in an institutional context based on a “[...] predictability of aesthetic information trajectories and effects incompatible with the multidirectional and simultaneous flow of historical continuity” (Britto, 2006, p. 130). The aim, on the contrary, is to dwell on an asymmetrical history involving dance: the history of the company seen through the lens of the gesture and movement of the dancing body in a choreographic work, which is both a kinetic icon and a historiographical index, given that the gesture loaded with drama and ritual bring with it certain operative modes, the creative process and aesthetic forms that reverberates in its historical repertoire and vice versa.

From this perspective, one can perceive a similarity with the inferences by Marques and Britto (2018) when they distance themselves from a historiographical conception imbued with an attachment to a symmetrical, continuous and linear-causal temporality. Marques and Britto (2018) assert that:

[...] given this conception of asymmetric temporality, the passage of time is manifested by the variation in the circumstantial state of things (people, ideas, objects, places, situations), resulting from the co-effects to which they are subjected in all their interactions. To make their historiography is, then, to understand them from the perspective of their actions' *resonance* in time, beyond their respective durations. When dance is understood as something incorporated into the body, this tacit commitment (which every human creation expresses) between explaining the world and living in it a certain way, then the body is understood as a cultural narrative that is constructed co-evolutionarily (Marques; Britto, 2018, p. 5-6).

Making the historiography of interactive processes that reverberate in time beyond their respective durations – such as, for instance, the construction of the gesture that provides the theme for a choreographic composition, bringing with it the performative and historiographical identity and action of a dancing collective – seems to also resonate here in unison with the notion proposed by Britto (2008) that the historical and memorial narrative of gesture and dance has no beginning, since it is a process – “[...] [it] has axes of occurrence. It has no direction, since it takes place in a network – it has a sense of continuity. It has no stages, as it is uninterrupted – it has transitory steps. It does not progress [...] it shows a gradual specialization” (Britto, 2008, p. 17).

It is the performative gesture translated into dance and permeated by a historical matrix in its procedural and temporally asymmetric axis of occurrence – a dance company performing in an institutional space – that is the substance of this study. I assume that it is the gesture that is the source of the meaning in/of the movement, in/of the choreography, in/of the show and in/of the dance. It is for this reason, therefore, that the Genetic Criticism approach is used to elucidate some formal, aesthetic and conceptual aspects of the performative gesture in the process of creation in dance. In addition to producing meanings, gestures historically produce a reiterated consistency possibly related to specific ways of organizing a given thought.

A critical approach to the creation process involves history because it involves a gesture impregnated with the intent to think and do dance in a

dance collective recognized for its performance laden with drama, actualized in the present in a performative space/stage/scene. Making the historiography or audiovisually documenting the moment when a piece is created by this dance collective is relating its practice, permeated by a 40-year history, to the description, analysis and interpretation of its aesthetically and historically situated discourses. This historiographical project certainly generates tensions between the ways of thinking, doing and speaking of dance, from the perspective of a public and free higher education institution that houses this dance company.

In this sense, Roger Chartier (1994) asserts that:

[...] the fundamental object of a history whose project is to recognize the way in which social actors imbue their practices and discourses with meaning, seems to me to reside in the tension between the inventive capacities of individuals or communities and the constraints, norms and conventions that limit – with more or less strength, depending on their position in relationships of domination – what they are able to conceive, communicate and do. This observation is valid for a history of written works and *aesthetic productions*, always inscribed within the field of possibilities that make them conceivable, communicable and understandable (Chartier, 1994, p. 106, emphasis added).

If Chartier points out that the history of aesthetic works and productions – i.e. a dance piece – is within the field of possibilities and, because they are imbued with a communicative intention, they can be understood, I assume here that we are staging historical-body-graphic figurations of creative processes in dance as a means for rethinking dance itself.

It is also worth mentioning that, in assuming that dance only makes sense if it is danced (Katz, 2005) and that the dancing body plays a key role in the elaboration of a historical-body-graphic discourse about a given collective – i.e. the UFPR Téserra Dance Company – I refer again to Brito's reasoning when she points out that “[...] the relationship between the world, the body that lives in it and the dance that this body performs, is based on a communication mechanism [...] whose effects propagate over time, resulting in varying levels of collective organization” (Britto, 2008, p. 22).



To clarify the choices outlined above – an investment in perception and logical/analytical reasoning, without disregarding motion capture technologies – I emphasize that the criticism of processes fits the investigation’s objectives, since, according to Salles, “[...] as we address the records the artist makes throughout the construction of the artwork [...] we are following the artist’s continuous work and, thus, observing that the creative act is the result of a process” (Salles, 2000, p. 21). I point out that, in this sense, the growing interest in process and craftwork that surrounds the creation of a show/scene, whether in dance or theater, led in 2013 to a pioneering initiative by the *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença* (Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies) of publishing a dossier called *Theatrical Genetics* entirely dedicated to the subject.<sup>1</sup>

To close this introductory section, it remains to be said that the Têssera Dance Company will be examined through a historical-body-graphic approach using a primary source that, in turn, focuses on the *mise-en-scène* of a documentary about the construction of a gesture impregnated with relational nexuses, inscribed in a network that comprises the history, aesthetics and identity of that company. For this purpose, I present below a brief contextualization of the dance company.

### **On the History of/in Dance – UFPR Têssera Dance Company as a spatiotemporal organizational system**

The company, founded in 1981 in Paraná and directed by Rafael Pacheco, has been part of the modern dance scene for 40 years (1981-2021). It is part of the Brazilian public and free higher education institutional structure and is linked to the Extension and Culture Dean’s Office and to the Culture Coordination Office of the Universidade Federal do Paraná.

One can perceive from text excerpts published in its institutional website<sup>2</sup> that the company’s choreographic work involves a technical and aesthetic thought matrix originated in a dance with German roots “[...] updated by the theater elements that permeate it, making its scenic identity to be known and recognized by its symbolic, ritualistic choreographic approach, with its high level of drama accentuated even more by the performative

gesture” (Wosniak, 2020, p. 88). With regard to this historical and organizational structure of a theoretical and aesthetic thought translated into dance, it is worth mentioning Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958), Mary Wigman (1886-1973) and Hanya Holm (1893-1992) as important sources of informational syntheses for some of the company’s adaptations involving its own interaction with the local, regional and national context.

Dance in Curitiba is built upon a strong, unavoidable legacy left by its colonization (Wosniak, 2008). “About twelve ethnic groups make up the culture and identity of Paraná: Germans, Ukrainians, Poles [...]” (Wosniak, 2008, p. 228, emphasis added), which have acquired certain supposedly inherited particularities. In this sense, as Britto states “[...] each body, with its inheritances, offers particular conditions to process the acquisitions that modify it, performing the required adjustments [...] for purposes of intelligibility of the processed information” (2008, p. 29).

The dance historically developed within the company has changed over its 40-year existence, influenced by the – contaminant – apparatuses employed, the surroundings and the action of time itself in the residues of the aesthetic matrices that informed the company’s early performances. The co-evolutionary effects and traits inescapably point to the aesthetic matrices generating the dance, which is deeply impregnated with the significant gesture proposed by Laban, or with the charged expressionist interpretation observed in Wigman’s works, but this is a process occurring over time, in a dialogue with complex, interdisciplinary interaction networks accessible to it.

Theater elements, for example, are also introduced into the constitution of the danced gesture within the company. The Company’s website brings information revealing, since 1984, strong influences from theories and dramaturgical approaches postulated by Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) and Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999) at the confluence of a thinking on dance infused with theater. This is not about professing an approach to history based on consanguineous or genetic technical and aesthetic heritages, since, as Britto (2008) shows, this line of reasoning would fail to explain the variations in formulation and the divergent dance patterns of bodies and/or companies that express their common roots.



Dance is, therefore, a historical product of human action: each body constructs its own dance which, however, is related to the knowledge made available under each historical circumstance and to the associative patterns that the body develops to establish its associations with the world – other bodies, other dances, other forms of knowledge. And the history of dance is a narrative of the coherence established through these associations (Britto, 2008, p. 30).

The narrative of the coherence established in the dancing collective is a historiographical product made visible – in printed and audiovisual records of works, but also, especially, on the company's institutional website – by a wealth of information about the company's artistic and creative path throughout its four decades/circumstances in associations spatially and temporally determined by the permanence and developments of the knowledge generated there.

Regarding one of these multidirectional and simultaneous developments that erupt from the company's indicial flow of historical continuity, I point out the year 2016, in which another process of research, scripting and choreographic creation was completed and premiered in November at the UFPR Rector's Office Theater. The show's printed program and the company's website bring information about the choreographic piece *Black Dog*, created from symptomatic metaphors based on a pressing issue of contemporaneity: depression. The choreographer, Rafael Pacheco, created a 60-minute narrative based on six symptoms of psychosocial disorders, revealing on stage, in addition to the gesture, the dance and the theatrical performance, the historical assumptions of the company's performative identity and action.

In an excerpt from an interview with the author, Pacheco explains his aspirations to construct a gesture conveying not only emotional intentionality, but also, if possible, the history/identity of a company that has in its moving body the primary media for complex bodily records that harbor the soul of the gesture:

[...] I based it on studies on depression, many readings, accounts, documentaries on the topic, but this was only the first stage. In the process of creating the characters that would embody the ideas in question, I needed to access the gesture through the sensation, through the commitment to the exercise

of composing the symptom. I needed to access the *soul of the gesture*. There was no other way... (Pacheco, 2017, emphasis added).

The company's identity, an issue revisited in each work, in each project staged, inevitably impregnates the iconic gesture with historical nuances. In an excerpt from a news article published by the UFPR News Portal, the choreographer points out: "[...] Têssera works with emotion, [with] strong and controversial themes. This emotion allowed the company to have *its own identity*. People identify the company's work. The film is important for showing this *identity*" (Murakami, 2020, emphasis added). Based on this account, it is possible to assume that the gesture thought/danced by the company is also directed to the public; the reception of the gesture's emotional charge must be balanced with the reception of the movement traced in space. The choreographic composition originates in the relationships formed around emotion, soul, feeling, interpretation and movement.

The next step in rethinking the methodology for studying the asymmetric history in/of the company's dance will adopt the perspective of the gesture and movement of the bodies dancing the *Black Dog* piece, which will be revealed here as both kinetic icons and historical-body-graphic indexes, given that the gesture, loaded with drama and ritual, bring with it certain operative modes, the creative process and aesthetic forms that reverberates in its historical repertoire and vice versa.

I will now address, therefore, the observation, description and analysis of the audiovisual document *A Alma do Gesto* (2020), aiming to extract from certain excerpts possible historical-body-graphic generalizations. It is in this sense that Salles advise us to maintain a relational interpretive gaze – at this unique audiovisual document – “[...] capable of overcoming our tendencies towards segmented analyzes and that enables us to establish nexuses and name them [...] to open a space for interpreting the relationships that connect them” (Salles, 2010, p. 16).

An important interconnection this study aims to show involves the company's spatial relationship with its creation environment, which also varies over time, involves its institutional memory and permeates the bodies/primary media in a cyclic and asymmetric reconstitution, translated by a

thought in constant process of creation. The reason for this is that history is also a constant process of creation and re-elaboration.

**The documentary film *A Alma do Gesto* as a system of memorial record: a historical-body-graphic *mise-en-scène*?**

*A Alma do Gesto* is a 65-minute long documentary feature film in black and white (b/w), created within the scope of the joint investigations conducted by the members – artists/teachers/researchers – of two research groups linked to a Graduate Program – the Master’s Degree in Film and Video Arts (PPG-CINEAV) at the Universidade Estadual do Paraná (Unespar). The directors and screenwriters, interested in the process of creation in the arts of the body, brought together a multidisciplinary team, composed primarily by students from the undergraduate and graduate programs in Cinema and Audiovisual, to participate in the process of filmmaking in various technical roles.<sup>3</sup>

During 2016, the filming covered the annual evaluation/public hearing process for company members in February, the daily routine with practical classes in modern dance technique, improvisation and choreographic composition, as well as theatrical acting laboratories and dozens of rehearsal sessions that included the memorial recording of gesture creation, the structuring of each of the characters and the unrelenting repetition of movement sequences, in preparation for the show’s debut at the UFPR Rector Office’s theater in November of the same year.

When thinking about the concept of memorial record (*registro memorial*, in Portuguese), it is necessary to call attention to the etymological origin of the Latin word *regestum*, which, as Ribeiro (2020, p. 3) asserts, “[...] means to reclaim something that already happened (*re-gestum*), [and] refers to the writing of important information.” In this case, the film *A Alma do Gesto* – in its imaginal and sound matrix – aside from being a kind of performative manifesto about creation in dance, also involves an important discursive, documentary and historical-body-graphic memorial record. But where does the notion of documentary record come from, bringing its historiographical contributions to the body that moves and dances its own history?

The coexistence of opposing theoretical conceptions and documentary praxes is still prevalent in current debates about this particular way of thinking-making cinema. Documentaries can be considered an in-between place that, through representation – staging or *mise-en-scène* – produces different assertions about reality. According to Bordwell and Thompson, “*mise en scène* [...] means ‘putting into the scene,’ and it was first applied to the practice of directing plays” (2013, p. 205). In the cinematographic arts it refers to everything that the director selects to put into the film frame; in this sense, the director *stages the event for the camera*.

In the case of *A Alma do Gesto*, it involves a particular way of documenting the process of artistic creation, in which the real/referent voice of the moving and dancing body is continuously permeated by documentary fiction. Would it be then sensible to consider this documentary film process contaminated by fiction an asymmetric historical account about the history of the company’s own approach to dance?

I bring to this reflection, in an attempt to elucidate possible ways to think and answer the rhetorical question, Ramos and Nichols, two theorists who understand the documentary film as a different type of film. According to Ramos, a documentary is a kind of representational discourse or narrative “[...] that establishes assertions with images and sounds, or with the aid of images and sounds, using the usual forms of spoken or written language (the narrator’s speech, or the speech of men and women in the world, or even from interviews and accounts), noises or music” (2008, p. 81). For Nichols, the historical context and the question of representation are essential in the formulation of a concept for the documentary film, as it portrays representations of historical images and sounds from the world lived and experienced, in fact, by individuals – the social actors. Documentaries “[...] mount arguments, or formulate persuasive strategies of their own, setting out to persuade us to accept their views [...] the idea of representation is central to documentary” (Nichols, 2012, p. 30).

After reading these assumptions, I point out the conception of documentary film as a specific form of representation, which involves a form of knowledge based on assertions about the historical universe we share. This

universe coincides with the indicial character of image, which is particularly intense in documentary films, since the moment of its capture – when the camera’s gaze is on the phenomenon/action/subjects filmed – the indicial relationship between images and the world and the specifics of the documentary shot, as pointed out by Ramos (2005; 2008; 2018), are key factors in distinguishing documentaries from other types of film. This supposed indexical character is a formal condition for thinking about documentary as a powerful primary source that postulates certain memorial and historical-body-graphic characteristics of the universe of dance.

In *A Alma do Gesto*, Baggio and Nogueira capture the presence of the dancing voice – evoked in embodied accounts, in a narration that seems to guide bodily states and metaphorical images in the creation of the choreographic gesture – and the staging in different locations. If the fictional narrative uses actors to represent fictional characters, “[...] the documentary narrative prefers to work the very bodies that give a concrete form to real-world personalities, or to make use of people who have an up-close experience of the universe presented” (Ramos, 2008, p. 26).

It is from this perspective – the experience of a near universe – that I begin to examine the first excerpt from the documentary [00:10:24 to 00:11:18], in which the company’s director and choreographer verbally asks two social actors – two dancers – to move and make the symbolic gesture being developed at that singular moment in *Black Dog’s* creation process. Pacheco, scenically situated in front of a dance room/studio’s mirrors, is saying: “[...] the right arm, it takes the gesture to eye level; this hand [should be] a little looser, because it is a primal protection movement, like this...” (*A Alma do Gesto*, 2020). In an analogy to Ramos’ assumptions (2005; 2008; 2018), it can be said that the social actors recognize and recall the company’s history and historical identities and actions through their bodies, which, in turn, express a specular interplay between a virtualized past and an actualized present. When performing or acting, the dancers seen in this excerpt, as they receive verbal information and respond as performers, end up entering into a specular game in which they represent themselves and at the same time talk about historical, memorial and affective facts regarding themselves and the



other company members. Their bodies inhabit a universe close to them: the birthplace of their art, the dance studio. Their bodies celebrate a documentary voice of alterity based on characters – *self-mise-en-scène* – constructed in front of the camera's gaze. That doesn't stop them, however, from staging the creation of the gesture at that exact moment (Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Process of creating an iconic kinetic gesture for the dance piece *Black Dog* (2016)

Source: Frame sequence from the documentary film *A Alma do Gesto* (2020)

In support of this hypothesis, I turn to Mocarzel (2014), who argue that when we put ourselves in front of a camera or even just on a stage, we immediately create an “[...] alterity to ourselves, a character beyond but at the same time *from ourselves*, which ends up acquiring a life of its own, as in any work of fiction” (Mocarzel, 2014, p. 177, emphasis added). The documentary voice, in this case, argues in favor of a supposed historical identity constructed by the gesture impregnated with meanings and framed by the camera's gaze.



The notion of argument/argumentation, for Nichols (2005; 2012), is not restricted to what is verbally said. It is also expressed in the composition of the shots and in the relationship established between them during editing; in the use of sound or its absence; in the type of narrative chronology used; in the choice of types of image, shots, camera angles and transition effects between takes, which is called voice or mode of representation. The author postulates the existence of six modes of representation: expository, poetic, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative.

The empirical object of this investigation is a documentary about the process of artistic creation and memorial recording of the choreographic gesture, in addition to being mainly based on an observational approach whose main exponent is the North American Direct Cinema movement. In this mode of representation, the aim is to reduce as much as possible filmmakers' intervention in the filming of a particular theme or event. Like a "fly on the wall," the filmmaker – or the camera's gaze – seeks to capture *true moments*, which will be transformed into a narrative at editing.

Observational documentaries end up sacrificing conventional artistic expression – such as image finishing/processing effects and other post-production effects. Thus, they prioritize grainy, poorly lit images and sudden changes in direction, with the purpose of bringing to the screen the truest, most historical and real context possible in filming.

In the second excerpt from *A Alma do Gesto* [00:12:38 to 00:13:08], we glimpse the value given to the experience of capturing in film the story of the creation of another iconic gesture for the choreographic work *Black Dog*, precisely where and how it happens, without prior or fixed scripts. This is the aspect that Nichols (2005, p. 54) defines as "[...] the shift from artistic expressiveness to historical revelation [of the fact itself]," which does not prevail in this type of documentary, the strategic appeal of textual construction.

In this historical-body-graphic *mise-en-scène*, the choreographer finds himself immersed in the elaboration of a set of gestures based on an idea of movement that starts from a feeling of confinement, of restrained movement induced by fear – metaphorically referring to one of the symptoms of

depression, the *Black Dog's* theme: the panic of being alone – and he does so by verbalizing instructions, kinesthetic coordinates, in addition to using his own body to show models and patterns of movement that could be part of the choreographic score of the social actors called to compose the scene.

The choreographer, framed at the center of a medium shot in front of two immense arches formed by the dance studio windows (Figure 2), talks about the sensations that must permeate the birth of the gesture:

So... look: here, I don't have much room to escape... Neither does Dani. Go there, Dani, put your head over there next to Bruna, look... It's too much high: not like this... [showing a gesture]. The idea is not compression [making a gesture with his hands closed]. This compression you're doing... I have some space. I can go there, and here, suddenly I can even try to go here... Yes, Bruna: look at the fear. The gesture is small, it breathes, it comes and... you got the idea. That's it! [exclaiming at the exact moment when the dancer shows in her face and suspended breath that she understood the idea of the gesture] (*A Alma do Gesto*, 2020).



Figure 2 – Process of creating/explaining the emotion impregnating the gesture in *Black Dog* (2016)

Source: Frame sequence from the documentary film *A Alma do Gesto* (2020)

This procedure, verbal communication by the social actor/choreographer, carried out at the moment of the gesture is being created, ends up thematizing the UFPR Dance Company's historical identity, if we take into account the information obtained from primary sources such as the company's website and a 2020 interview with the choreographer:

[...] it's the issue of the gesture. It's always the gesture. When I think about the creation of a new choreography, there comes the theme to impregnate me in the research of movements, arguments, ideas of forms, groups, characters – Têssera is like that, right?! Dance is always imbued with theater elements; the movement dresses the character, makes him move, makes him understand why he moves, how he moves. The gesture speaks of emotion coming from intention. I don't believe in movement for movement's sake. This is not the Company's artistic creed [...] It doesn't matter on what work I'm working with the cast: I always start from an understanding of the gesture. The dancers are implicated in this moment of creation. I don't bring things ready. Let's go together to this birth of the gesture, it's like that [...]. Do gesture and movement carry history? I have no doubts... I think the gesture and movement that make the Dance are [related to] the Company's history, because a Dance Company is made up of dances following each other over time... Here, it's like that, each dance has its own particularities, but all speak of an identity; the gesture in Têssera is charged with soul, with intention, with fire, with surrender... And this is a 39-year old story... (Pacheco, 2020).

The focus on the performer, framed alone in center foreground, on the theatrical expression of the gesture in its fullness of form and emotional charge, attests to a certain timbre, that is, an identity, a historical trace of the creative process. Such conception of historical-body-graphic *mise-en-scène* also results in a relevant memorial record, as we are arguing here, because, according to Nichols (2012), a speech can be memorized by developing a kind of "memory theater" as a way to remember, keep and record what is to be said about an object, subject or institution. This theatricalizing involves "[...] imaginatively placing the components of the speech in different parts of a familiar space" (Nichols, 2012, p. 90).

The familiar space is crucial for a concept such as "[...] location-staging"<sup>4</sup> (Ramos, 2008, p. 42), in which social actors – real characters permeated

by the fiction of documentary *mise-en-scène* – move in a certain sequence defined by the cinematographic montage, thus reinforcing the historiographical arguments embedded in the choreographic creative process that speaks of the company’s historical-body-graphic identity through the camera’s gaze. As Nichols states:

Since films are not delivered as spontaneous speech, the role of memory enters in more fully in two ways: first, film itself provides a tangible “memory theater” of its own. It is an external, visible representation of what was said and done. Like writing, film eases the burden to commit sequence and detail to memory. *Film can become a source of “popular memory,”* giving us a vivid sense of how something happened in a particular time and place (Nichols, 2012, p. 90, emphasis added).

Watching the documentary, we feel that something – the artistic creative process of a dance piece and its later public presentation – happened in a specific time and place. These are the tangible spatiotemporal marks left by this memorial document’s delivery.

The delivery in the documentary film *A Alma do Gesto* is constructed around two components: voice and gesture, or what Nichols describes as “[...] commentary and perspective” (Nichols, 2012, p. 92), advancing the arguments involved in the dance piece’s process of creation from the perspective of the gesture captured by the camera’s gaze. While the gesture involves non-verbal communication, the choreographer’s voice, in turn, erupts with eloquent verbalized instructions and focuses on mental images and metaphors when conducting step by step the creation of the gesture drawing from an intense emotional charge – a trademark of the collective’s way of thinking and doing dance, from the classroom, to rehearsals and to its performance on stage.

In the third excerpt of the documentary [00:21:42 to 00:54:27], we finally have a glimpse of the completion of the work, that is, the passage from procedural document of gesture creation in the classroom/studio, to rehearsals and at last to the final performance that takes place on the stage of the UFPR Rector Office’s Theater (Figure 3).



Figure 3 – Gesture appropriation in the rehearsal room and the final performance of *Black Dog* (2016)  
Source: Frame sequence from the documentary film *A Alma do Gesto* (2020)

During this long excerpt, we became aware that “[...] the work of art is, with rare exceptions, the result of an activity characterized by a progressive transformation, which requires, on the artist’s part, investment of time, dedication and discipline,” as noted by Salles (2000, p. 22). Because I was certain of the existence of this [trans]formative process in *Black Dog*, I decided to elucidate, using the documentary film, the creation process of

gesture and work, approaching them as memorial vestiges and as important parts of the company's historical-body-graphic repertoire.

Salles (2006; 2010) argues that, as we get closer to the creation process, we become able to discern, as far as possible and in light of the available documents, the superimposed layers of an artistic work. It is when we are before the action, or rather, before the documents and records of the process that “[...] we come to understand the genesis of the work and not just the ‘finished work’ delivered to the public” (Salles, 2013, p. 21). In this documenting of a process, the record once again brings out the very documentary *mise-en-scène* investigated here.

Taking a particular look into this third excerpt, we can observe the director/choreographer's watchful eye on the execution of the movements in rigorous rehearsals, always accompanied by verbal communication. We know this is a recurrent argument. In the final performance of *Black Dog*, premiered in November 2016, the camera-as-actor, through an equally performative editing, also becomes part of the documentary scene, with takes defined by cuts in the available shots. The camera's gaze shifts between different angles as it shows the movements: from above, frontal, close-ups.

The director of *A Alma do Gesto* explains that the control of space elements, objects and bodies will be fundamental for composing the *mise-en-scène*. It is the *mise-en-scène* that enables the shots that will later be shaped into takes that will compose the scene.

Despite the fact that the scene is only actually composed in the montage, it will be made from the shots, as raw material for the takes. Hence the importance of thinking, with respect to documentary direction, about spatiality – including objects and bodies – and the actions, translated as *mise-en-scène* for the composition of the framing; and also think about temporality as putting limits on the actions that take place in space and which presupposes the duration of the shots and, later, the duration of the takes that will compose the scene. It is about thinking about the materiality – images and sounds – that will be responsible for expressing the film's ideas in that which is characteristic of cinematographic language (Baggio, 2020, p. 85).



Still in this documentary segment (Figure 3), we come to understand how documentary cinematography edit evidence in order to disclose and demonstrate the process observed in space and time. We watch the gesture erupting in a familiar space inhabited during 2016 and enter into the formal space of the (re)presentation on stage/scene of the gesture contained in *Black Dog*.

The social actors performatively enact a kind of *mise-en-scene* of themselves. As Comolli (2008, p. 330) argues, “[...] *self-mise-en-scène* is inherent to any observed process.” According to Comolli:

Let us ask ourselves how the filmmaker could not face *the issue of the other*. Not just as an issue of the other to be filmed. But as an issue of the other who is, at the moment I’m filming him, also gazing back at me. The one I film sees me [...] The one I film appears to me with more than just his awareness of being filmed, his conception of gazing, he appears with his unconscious, coming towards the cinematographic machine, itself charged with the unthought, he appears with his body before the bodies of those who film (Comolli, 2008, p. 84).

From this perspective, *A Alma do Gesto* is a specular game between a memorial document that gives a glimpse of the history of/in the Company’s dance and a performative staging based on the creative representation of reality. As Comolli argues, “[...] the filmmaker films representations. Already in progress, *mise-en-scènes* incorporated and re-enacted by the agents of these representations” (2008, p. 84-85).

In representing the Company’s historical-body-graphic characteristics, under the particular circumstances of the creation process of a gesture, a perspective or a point of view, the documentary text, here, does not need to be an indicial reproduction of reality. This fact gives *A Alma do Gesto* its own voice, which is what allows us to gain a perspective on the collective’s *historical audiovisual things*.

In documentary films, the voice is considered a way of expressing an argument, which relies on an informational logic enabled by the camera-as-actor. We can assume, then, that the voice concerns *how* a point of view is transmitted considering the organization of the text. The voice of

documentary is not restricted to what is verbalized by the director/choreographer – an eloquent, visible voice – but also includes the invisible voices, represented by the social actors who deliver their memorial accounts about how the Company thinks/does dance. These actors' voices/bodies are and make history at the time of the shooting. If “[...] the voice of documentary speaks with all the means available to its maker [director]” (Nichols, 2012, p. 76), we can assume here that the means available to create the memorial document are the options available for the editing, framing and camera angles: combinations that will determine the aesthetic arrangement between image and sound.

The site, the habitat, the house that harbors the dancing collective's history is a significant presence in the documentary about the creation process. The social actors are nourished by that space in their enunciation of the history and stories of and in dance.

The last excerpt examined (Figure 4) calls attention to the proportions of the creation space: the classroom/dance studio where the routines of training classes, movement creation laboratories, rehearsals and theoretical lectures are daily experienced. This excerpt also reveals the route through the UFPR historic building's internal and imposing staircases, which lead our gaze upwards, to the building's second floor – geographic coordinates – where the Company is located.





Figure 4 – The spaces of creation – inhabited network studio/stage in *Black Dog* (2016)

Source: Frame sequence from the documentary film *A Alma do Gesto* (2020)

Finally, the camera's gaze and the editing highlight the perspective of the camera gazing at the UFPR Rector's Office Theater in an unusual framing: from the viewpoint of the performer's (also the camera's) gaze at the theater's empty seats. The imaginal narrative adopts the camera's gaze argument from the perspective of the social actor's as the protagonist who inhabits the stage, the scene, and who stages there their historical-body-graphic performance over and over again. Here, we witness a collision between a network of inhabited spaces – studio/stage – and the time of (re)presentation.

In this sense, Salles (2010) points out:

The artist [...] is immersed in their geographical and social space, with its restrictions and possibilities of movement. Offices, ateliers, *rehearsal rooms or studios* are spaces for the artist's action, which harbor physical and mental work and hold a potential for creation as they offer the possibility of storing objects. *This space also contains memory and imagination*, indexes the artist's gestures and becomes the keeper of a cultural collection, safeguarding the time when the works are created (Salles, 2010, p. 125, emphasis added).

At this point, the events experienced in these spaces of inhabitation and creation are intensified by subjectivity and by the creative treatment of spatiotemporal reality in the documentary. The camera-as-actor, by choosing to explicitly show the director/choreographer in his studio, playing a percussion

instrument/drums, drumsticks – disclosing his teaching performance before the company – the stairs, the theater stage’s linoleum-covered floor, frame the UFPR Dance Company’s historical universe, creatively intervening in it. Continuity editing, which is carried out in such a way as to make the linear transitions between takes imperceptible, is given no priority in this documentary mode. The frames in *A Alma do Gesto*, especially in this fourth excerpt, explore unrelated environments without following a sequential spatiotemporal logic.

The spatial and geographic shifts – dance studio, building stairs, theater stage, dressing rooms, lighting booth – in the documentary voice composition are clearly associated with what Ramos (2008) refers to as location-staging as opposed to constructed-staging. The location-staging, in this case, differs from the constructed-staging, as this location’s environment is the very environment where the filmed social subjects/actors live their lives and daily construct themselves as real characters, even if, in camera shots, the actions have been rehearsed.

In *A Alma do Gesto*, the director/choreographer and the company cast are themselves, (re)presenting themselves in real-world environments turned into fictional location.

### **Final considerations**

Based on the understanding that various documentary proposals and modes in the field of audiovisual culture can contribute to the field of History and Historiography, especially regarding approaches to the history and stories in and of dance, I took as the empirical object of my investigation the documentary film *A Alma do Gesto* (2020), by Eduardo Tulio Baggio and Juslaine Abreu Nogueira, as a unique memorial record of a process of creation in dance and, therefore, as a powerful historical-body-graphic manifesto about the UFPR Têssera Dance Company.

By admitting the possibility that an audiovisual thing/object lends itself to various purposes – ethical, aesthetic, documentary – I started with the following research problem: could a documentary film be considered as a

unique record of a creation process in dance and as such possibly produce a – historical and memorial – narrative discourse about the body in dancing movement?

After the analysis and reflections undertaken here, I believe that the answer to the question is affirmative. It was possible to examine the documentary *A Alma do Gesto* – based on four specific excerpts – and verify that it serves as a viable primary source on indicial strategies about a dance company's daily life – classes, rehearsals, performances, bodies, creation space, methods, choreographic aesthetics, inhabited places.

The text/document that narrates – the real permeated by fiction in a documentary *mise-en-scène* – the history of dance, movement and iconic gesture, inscribed on the bodies of a dance company cast is understood here as a different and subjective kind of historical-body-graphic writing constituted in and by the cinematographic language. It was the documentary cinematographic language that allowed the memorial record of the creative act itself to guide the observation of the gesture, both in the effort of extracting emotion from a body that changes under the watchful eye of the director and choreographer, and in the completion of this same gesture as performed on a theater stage in the choreographic piece *Black Dog*. This work in progress – documented in its inception – coexists with the memory of the company's repertoire, because, as Salles (2010, p. 129) states, “[...] each new canvas brings with it the history of past ones.”

As explained above, the current challenges of producing the history and historiographies of and in dance are still permeated by questions posed by historians who, long ago, realized that narrating history is not the same as reproducing what actually happened. The only possibility, that is, representing a perspective on history from specific viewpoints, I believe that the documentary *mise-en-scène* constitutes a unique narration about the process of creation in dance.

In this sense, the UFPR Dance Company, through the documentary film *A Alma do Gesto*, documents a particular type of environment/space/time for its own historical (re)presentation from the perspective

of the camera's gaze. It is not merely a question of witnessing the birth of an iconic gesture translated into dance. Rather, it is about understanding that 40 years of history of/in dance are needed to create that gesture and that dance<sup>5</sup>.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The *Theatrical Genetics* dossier of the Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença [v. 3, no. 2, Jun. 2013] is available at: <<https://www.seer.ufrgs.br/presenca/issue/view/1770>>. Accessed on: Aug 3, 2021.
- <sup>2</sup> The company's website offers a chronological narrative of its history, highlights some works from its choreographic repertoire, presents human resources information and maintains a photographic gallery available for consultation at: <http://www.tessera.ufpr.br/>. Accessed on: Mar. 5, 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> The film was produced within the scope of the Laboratory for Film and Audiovisual Research (LICA/Unespar) as a research activity linked to the research groups CineCriare (Cinema: creation and reflection – PPG-CINEAV/Unespar/CNPq) and Kinedária – Art, Poetics, Cinema, Video (PPG-CINEAV/Unespar/CNPq) due to their the interest in the creation processes of the UFPR Têssera Dance Company. The making of the film was enabled by a partnership between Universidade Estadual do Paraná (Unespar) and Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR), through its Extension and Culture Office (PROEC) and Coordination of Culture (COC). The film was premiered to the public in October 2020, at the 9th *Mirada Paranaense*, which is part of the *Olhar de Cinema – Curitiba Int'l Film Festival*. *A Alma do Gesto* was awarded the best feature-length documentary film at the *Rameshwaram International Film Festival* (RIFF) in India (2020) and was in the short list at the *Luleå..... International Film Festival* in Sweden (2021). \*Because it is currently on the circuit of competitive national and international film festivals, the film is not yet available for online access.
- <sup>4</sup> The location-staging includes the localized action of the camera-as-actor [referring here to the entire cinematographic team present at the filming location] that asks social actors – in this case, both the director/choreographer and the



cast of the UFPR Dance Company – to represent/stage before the camera everyday acts they actually perform in their historical, real-world circumstances.

<sup>5</sup> The publication of this work had financial support from CAPES.

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