

Dance and Resistance in Tango and Reisado: Comparative Audio-Visual Research on Cultural Performance in Argentina and Brazil

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Abstract:

Comparative audio-visual research within Cultural Studies has emerged in recent years as an interdisciplinary form of critique and social intervention. In Latin America, many of the cultural manifestations of the body, which were previously discredited in academic circles, are currently at the centre of interdisciplinary research, thanks to their being captured “in situ” by performers, philosophers and cultural researchers in the form of audio-visual essays. Examples of this idea can be found in comparative research on traditional dances in Brazil and Argentina.

The audio-visual recording of artistic performances in urban spaces brings into the current debate the historical and choreographic links with the influence of Afro-descendant culture on both countries. Many body movements and choreographic cells are currently conceived as forms of resistance. I based my analysis on two audio-visual essays – *In Corpo Tango* and *Philosophies of the Body in the Cariri of Ceará* – that address Tango in Argentina and Reisado from Brazil.

In order to compare these corporal expressions, I conducted a film analysis of a synthetic set of choreographic cells. I intend to highlight the relational aspect of bodywork in these dances and fights by revealing the improvisation that is structured in duets and that which is re-enacted as a form of provocation and cultural resistance.

Keywords: body; audio-visual research; Argentina; Brazil; cultural resistance.

Introduction

This article examines a number of concepts and practices of audio-visual research on the basis of the dialogue between dance and philosophy. In my trajectory as researcher and filmmaker, this dialogue begins in my native country, Argentina, and travels for several years and kilometres until it reaches the north east of Brazil. When the topic of dance and audio-visual research is mentioned, most people in academic circles think, immediately, about three main concepts: first, that dance and cinema are arts that are representative of the twentieth century; second, that audio-visual research is an area of visual anthropology; and, third, that there exists a formal tension between how cinema captures time and the ephemeral time of the choreographic art of dance.

All of these notions are correct. However, when we look for Brazilian and Argentinian films that narrate the history of their countries’ traditional dances, we find that material is scarce. The lack of material is even greater when we consider dances of African descent, such as the Tango from Argentina, and the Reisado from Brazil, principally because we are looking for artistic manifestations composed by latent patterns of

movement that originated with Afro-American peoples, mainly slaves and liberated slaves in both countries. My focus here is to investigate how some dances and some films represent local, national and transnational cultural, political and historical aspects through dances.

It is important to note that this work began as a doctoral research that collated more than 300 Argentinian films in which there were images of Tango and other dances. Of these 300, 30 were chosen for a real filmic analysis. This enabled me to have a clear notion of how Argentinian filmography, from its beginnings in 1896 up to the present day, has placed Tango – the personages, culture and his dance – at the core of its filmic dramaturgy.

In Brazilian filmography, dance appears much less on the screen before the 1960s, and this is one of the main reasons for my current audio-visual work. This lack of material was what motivated me to produce a film essay showing artists and dancers from the Cariri, in northeastern Brazil.

As a foreign philosopher in Brazil – I was born in Argentina – I carried out research in the field of aesthetics from a transnational perspective. And, as a filmmaker, I am always looking for new ways to create dialogues between artists from Latin American countries. According to Jean Rouch’s maxim, cinema is one of the instruments I possess to “show” the other as I see them; and, in my research, in addition to the action of “showing” I seek to produce changes in, dialogues with and approaches to the artists, through the cinematographic production itself. I tried to experience relations of intersubjectivity and to share moments of “cinema direction” and “audio-visual production” with the “real actors” of the films I produced, because I believe that this is a way of questioning the “authorial dimension” (NICHOLS, 2005) of the classic and modern documentary traditions.

My interest is in what I call audio-visual research in dance and cinema: the audio-visual production space between contemporary aesthetic theory, artistic production and historical post-colonial studies; in which Latin American comparative film studies are included.

Following the ideas of the English researcher Catherine Grant, we access a real critique when we associate cinematographic products, such as the cinematographic essay, with true audio-visual argumentation (GRANT, 2016). In this work of critical reflection, I gathered the filmic image of the body and the concepts about the body, ideas and narratives of the artists, dancers and researchers, trying to understand ethical aspects of the encounter between the audiovisual director, researchers and traditional artists.

Comparative audio-visual research in Brazil and Argentina

I seek to access the underlying pattern of relationships – so far never studied – between the Argentinian Tango and the Brazilian Reisado, to open a new aesthetic topic on body expressions as a form of resistance in Latin America. Traditionally, comparative audio-visual research in Latin America has considered as its object of study the filmic device itself, most often analysing the production, exhibition and reception of cinema in the different countries under comparison. I have taken a different path: my object of study

are the relationships between dances of African origin in Brazil and Argentina and the philosophy of body they display.

Before presenting my films, I will briefly outline the context of my study and the methodology used. It is important to point out that features of Afro-descendant culture – its music, dance and other performing arts – are not really evident in Brazil’s cinematography until well into the 1960s, and not until the 1980s in Argentina. It was only after the birth of both the “social documentary” and “Cinema Novo” that the camera went into the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, and among the groups of Afro-descendants in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

They are, of course, significant differences between the populations of the two countries under study. In Brazil, across a whole century of films, few Afro-Americans have been directors or actors, in spite of their comprising 54% of the population. The Afro-descendant cultural expression that has most commonly been captured on film is Samba, the music – in the form of carnival musicians and singers – more so than the dance. This hegemony of Samba in Brazilian film has been a strategic representation of the nation-state’s ideals.

In Argentina, the make-up of the population is very different to in Brazil. In 1810, under Spanish rule, Afro-American slaves comprised 30% of its inhabitants, but their numbers subsequently decreased, mainly due to their being sent to fight in the War of Independence from Spain, in which they played a key role as part of the so-called “batallones de pardos y morenos” (groups of Afro-American soldiers). By the end of the century, the Afro-American population had reduced even further, following the abolition of slavery in 1853, the War of the Triple Alliance and the 1871 yellow fever epidemic. Well into the twentieth century, this community suffered a lack of access to employment and health services, due to the Argentinian Government prioritising European immigrants in their state policies. First enslaved and then socially marginalised, the group developed a range of cultural and artistic expressions in the fields of music, cooking, poetry and, most significantly, dance. Throughout the nineteenth century, Afro-descendants came together at gatherings and celebrations called “Candombes”, in which they played and danced to syncopated rhythms, and which many historians believe gave rise to Tango. Today in Argentina, those who self-identify as Afro-American make up less than 5% of the population.



Figure 1: Stage of the San Martín Theatre. National Archives, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

In light of the fact that during Argentina’s silent film era (1896–1933) there was a general lack of representation of African culture, I wish to focus on a film from 1906, now lost but written about extensively in the literature of the time: *Creole Tango* [Tango Criollo], directed by Eugenio Py. This short film recorded an Afro-American clown of the Podestá Company circus, dancing Tango with his partner on the stage of the San Martín theatre.

Among the limited number of recordings of Afro-American-derived dance in the audio-visual history of Argentina and Brazil there are a few noteworthy examples.



Figure 2: Coco (Dance) Photograph of *Folklore Research Mission: Traditional Music of the North and the Northeast*. Commissioned by Mário de Andrade, Brazil, 1938

One of these is *Folklore Research Mission: Traditional Music of the North and the Northeast* [*Missão de Pesquisas Folclóricas Musica Tradicional do Norte e Nordeste*], a 1938 ethnographic documentary commissioned by Mário de Andrade (at the time head of the Department of Culture in the Municipality of São Paulo). The documentary was directed by Luiz Saia (the head of the Folklore Research Mission), Martin Braunwieser (musical director), Benedicto Pacheco (sound technician) and Antonio Ladeira (general assistant). The film was restored in 1997 and it can now be found in São Paulo’s Cinemateca Brasileira. It constitutes the first systematic recording of manifestations of the music and dance of north and northeastern Brazil’s traditional culture. The Folklore Research Mission carried out the filming in Pernambuco, Paraíba, Ceará, Piauí, Maranhão and Pará, and the documentary presents a never-before-seen panorama of traditional culture, including the dances and rituals of the region’s slaves.



Figure 3: Kings of Congo, Pombal, Paraíba (11/4/1938). Photography from the Folklore Research Archives at the São Paulo Cultural Centre, Brazil

A further example from Brazilian cinema is *Civil Disobedience* [Inconfidência Mineira], a 1948 film directed by Carmen Santos. In a ballroom scene with members of Brazil’s high society (wearing outfits similar to those worn in the Portuguese court) everyone stops dancing when they hear the sound of Lundu drums coming from the street. The dancers become spectators, watching a procession of slaves passing by dancing and singing Lundu. Many historians claim that Lundu, both the music and the dance, gave rise to Maxixe, which is also called the Brazilian Tango (SANDRONI, 2012).



Figure 4: Photogram of *Civil Disobedience* [Inconfidência Mineira], by Carmen Santos, Brazil, 1948

One of the Argentinian films I studied was *The History of Tango* [La Historia del Tango] from 1949, directed by Manuel Romero. It presents a timeline of the evolution of Tango and the stories surrounding its origins. The film begins with a cursory plotting of the route taken by the African slaves, as they crossed the Atlantic to the port on the River Plate in the holds of cargo ships, and then moves quickly on to the drums and dances of the Candombes on the streets of Buenos Aires, and the birth of Tango.



Figure 5: Photograph of *The History of Tango* [La Historia del Tango], Manuel Romero, Argentina, 1948

This brief journey through the history of Brazilian and Argentinian film revealed how difficult it is for researchers to find representations of African culture in Latin American cinema. As well as being scarce, the film recordings provide no details of the dances, or of the characteristic gestures and everyday movements, of Afro-descendant rituals and culture.

In search of the audio-visual history of dance in Latin American cinema

In my doctoral research on the relationship between cinema and dance (LOPEZ GALLUCCI, 2014) I commented that, from its inception, Argentinian cinema considered Tango – its gestures, dance and music – as an essential component of the mode of presentation that is the urban social drama. In addition, I questioned the systematic omission of Afro-descendant culture from these films. I found the cinema industry to have been used as a tool in the construction of the Argentinian nation-state and it was, except in cases such as that of the director Agustín Ferreyra, who openly identified himself as the son of an Afro-descendant mother, at the service of the hegemonic values of white society. Although the Argentine film production presents a great variety of cultural aspects of Tango "on", "off" and "behind the scenes", demonstrating how, through dance, Argentine society expresses gender and class differences, there was a long period during which relations tango and mestizo population were hidden from view.

A challenge I encountered during my research was the production of a systematic archive of images that would show the matrix of the gestures used in Tango, on the

basis of which I could identify elements of African culture that might have lived on in the dance.



Figures 6 and 7: Choreographic cells of the Tango dance. Photographic studio with film projection of *Quereme asi Piantao* by Eliseo Álvarez 1997. Performer: Natacha Muriel. Photo by Bruno Marton, 2014

However, an interesting thing happened in 2017 when I was beginning my audio-visual research into the traditional manifestations and dances of the Cariri, a central region of Ceará in northeastern Brazil. While immersed in the field, I recorded video and sound, a number of traditional groups who every year, over the period between the Nativity and the feast of the Epiphany, perform a series of artistic practices called Reisados. These practices, involving music, theatrical performances and dance, also included sword fights, to music, which whip the audience up into a ritual climax.



Figure 8: FeminineFemale? Reisado. Photogram of film *Philosophies of the Body in the Cariri of Ceará* by Natacha Muriel, 2018

Through analysing the dances and the fights in the audio-visual archives, I managed to identify in detail key aspects of their codification that were claimed by a number of informants to be the product of the region’s Afro-descendant culture. This is in line with historical research that attests to the presence of African slaves in the state of Ceará (RIEDEL, 1987).

As my aim is to examine the particular characteristics of the codification of these dances, I will first briefly outline the sociocultural processes that gave rise to them. Reisado first appeared during the period 1850–1900, adopting the form in which it is currently practised in the Cariri between 1940 and 1960. It is of traditional African origin with Iberian and Catholic influences. This sword fight, as an improvisation technique within rhythmic and musical temporality, is interesting to watch. The Reisado sword fight shares its historical and cultural roots with Congadas and Maracatus, all of which re-enact the battles between the Congo and Angola. It is performed alongside a religious ceremony, which, attended by an entourage representing members of the Portuguese court, culminates in the symbolic coronation of a King and Queen (similarly to in the traditional African Candombe that was performed in the River Plate region before it was banned).

In my fieldwork, it was interesting to observe how this form of dance, theatre performance and music reveals very little of its African roots. The Reisado’s dramaturgy and songs appear, at first glance, to be manifestations that invoke the Christian God, the angels, the Virgin Mary and the Three Wise Men. Among the Reisado’s range of artistic expressions, including its songs, “entremezes” – interludes of small dramatic scenes – and dances, I consider the sword fight to be that which most fully expresses its African origins. Traditional historiography claims that Ceará’s Afro-American population was small in the time of slavery, but more recent research shows that this is not the case (NUNES, 2011). Nevertheless, we know that Ceará’s slave population increased during the growth of the cotton industry in the mid-nineteenth century. Unable to buy slaves directly, Ceará imported them from Pernambuco, Maranhão and Bahía (RIEDEL, 1987, 100), at least until 1840. These slaves worked on cattle ranches and cotton plantations and identified themselves with the farming and shepherding cultures.

For the purposes of this comparative study it is important to consider the genesis of the other dance, Tango. Tango as a dance also emerged between 1850 and 1900 and its codification came to distinguish it from European forms of dance in the closeness of the partner hold – the embrace – and the skills of the dancers. Many authors associated the elements that were introduced into this form of dance in the River Plate region, Tango’s “cortes”, “zapateos” and “quebradas”, with both the dances of the “cuarteleros”, the women who accompanied the soldiers on the battlefield in the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870) and the corporeality of the Candombes. In the River Plate region, the Candombes had been allowed to continue on the condition that they did involve the symbolic coronation of Kings and Queens of the participants’ African countries of origin. The significant social restructuring that occurred between the end of the War of the Triple Alliance in 1870 in the River Plate region and the beginning of the First World War in 1914 provided the setting for the emergence of new Argentinian styles of theatre and bodywork.

The crossbreeding of the traditions of the European immigrants and the Afro-descendant cultural expressions and drum rituals resulted in unique theatre, circus, music and dance styles, one of which was Tango. By the time of the celebration of the centenary of the May Revolution in 1910, Tango had already achieved the status of an urban dance, and it adapted its choreography for the dance hall, bringing about the emergence of a new social class in Argentina. Between 1940 and 1955 (the so-called golden age of Tango), the codes for walking and improvisation were consolidated, and

the Argentinian middle class adopted Tango as a mode of representation of its values and as a positive form of self-expression. In 1980, new studies of the embrace, musicality, codification and improvisation presented Tango as a form of contemporary dance.

From empirical research to audio-visual critique

With the aim of examining the codification of Tango and Reisado, I conducted empirical audio-visual research into both styles of dance, the results of which I will now present. The first film essay, entitled *In Corpo Tango*, is the result of my doctoral research, which I concluded in 2014¹. This film presents the gestures and codification (axes “-1”, “0” and “+1” and system of movements “H”, “L” and “V”) for Tango (LOPEZ GALLUCCI, 2014). The essay focuses on the dissociations and spirals that Tango has inherited from African culture (from Candombe) and, although some historians deny the existence of any African influence in the music of Tango, I am able to provide evidence of its influence on the dance.

The second film essay, entitled *Philosophies of the Body in the Cariri of Ceará*, was made between 23 December 2017 and 6 January 2018, in the lead-up to the feast of the Epiphany, in the districts of Nova Olinda and Juazeiro do Norte (Ceará, Brazil). The essay highlights the different bodily expressions found in the inland regions of Ceará.



Figure 9: Reisado. Photogram of film *Philosophies of the Body in the Cariri of Ceará* by Natacha Muriel, 2018

Although this research sits in the borderland between documentary and film essay (CORRIGAN, 2011), it is the result of a journey from empirical research to audio-visual critique. I have employed my knowledge of dance along with an analysis of both films and data collected in the field to access the philosophies of dancers’ bodies. In this way, I explored the hidden relations between explicit culture and the gestures – in both the Tango dance and the Reisado fights – beneath which lie aspects of Afro-descendant culture that have survived by dint of mixing with what are socially acceptable traditions

¹ Available from: < <http://www.natachamuriel.com> > [Accessed 1 July 2017].

in the eyes of the ruling classes and the Catholic Church. And these traditional manifestations persist in modern-day urban life as a form of cultural resistance.

A number of ethical issues exist in this production space, those associated with documentary discourse and those concerning the critical and creative provocations of the cinematic essay (MORTON, 2017). According to the Brazilian documentary filmmaker João Moreira Sales, “... every documentary contains two distinct natures. On the one hand, it is a record of something that happened in the world; on the other, it is a narrative, a rhetoric constructed from what has been recorded” (MOREIRA SALLES, 2015, author’s translation). By taking a camera into my empirical research, I did not intend simply to produce recordings of dance. Rather, I sought to bring into this field of research practices that are not obvious, even to the protagonists themselves. The film essay offers a particular kind of argumentative narrative, which recreates that which has never been shown in the cinema and which has all but vanished from people’s memories. Narrating the unreported is part of a methodology that calls into question the historical forms of subjectivation associated with the ideals of the ruling classes that have appropriated the economies both of images and of the physical arts throughout the history of Latin American filmographies. The search for sources of choreography of African origin brings into current debate the ethical issues surrounding documentary discourse, film ethnography (FREIRE, 2005) and the philosophical provocations of the cinematic essay (WEINRCHTER LÓPEZ, 2015).

Conclusion

In light of the fact that dance is part of peoples’ cultural heritage (ZEMP, 2013), the film essays in this comparative study have revealed how and why the two dances under study endure in modern-day urban life. At numerous points in history, movements that reflect the Afro-descendant origins of Tango and Reisado have been combined with the predominant gestures of the time, thus concealing their African roots. In spite of this, it is possible to observe similar physical codes, principally in the improvisation carried out by couples. Each member takes on a role (explicit or otherwise) in the dramaturgy, and based on this, they structure their improvisation to the music. Two characteristics of both Tango and Reisado are strongly associated with a tradition of ritual fight scenes: the intense focus that is demanded both in the couple work and in the face of risk, and the danger presented both by the swords and by the legs that invade the partner’s personal space. The bodies of the participants improvise, by way of movements of distinct dissociation between upper and lower limbs, in order to carry out these invasions (sword strikes in Reisado; “cortes”, “sacadas”, “boleos” and “ganchos” in Tango). And, in both cases, there is the “amague”, or feint, an unexpected false movement in one direction and then a return to a static position, a great awareness of the body’s axis, and an excellent control of motor skills and of movement. In this improvisation, the couple’s playful relationship with both the music and the audience brings the performance to a highly emotional climax.

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