

What if all that was left was dramaturgy?

Observations on dance dramaturgy in the field of stage creation in contemporary dance from Río de la Plata

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Abstract

In this article I attempt to analyse and describe the foundations of some dramaturgical practices observed in creation processes in contemporary dance in which I have been directly or indirectly involved. This exercise has led me to consider dramaturgy as a *variable series of principles or operations for the deployment of choreographic projects*. By adopting a cross-disciplinary and situated approach, the aim is to set out why, although reflexivity and dramaturgical practice are not indispensable for artistic creation in dance, the place that it occupies in the conceptual network, practices, agreements and aesthetic and procedural conventions that today we call contemporary dance is indispensable. I approach dramaturgy in contemporary dance as a set of practices that shape a way of understanding the creative processes and not the reverse, as a theoretical approach from which creation practices derive. I argue that this mode is characterised by promoting processes that pay attention to the process itself and have effects on the division of work in the creative processes whose objective is to avoid a scission between experimentation and decision-making. This mode of organisation suggests a resistance to authorship in conventional terms and is permeated by the project of emancipation of the spectators, which displaces the focus from producing shows to creating experiences. One hypothesis is that this mode or dramaturgical paradigm is linked to the increase in the range of university artistic training in dance and to competitive funding mechanisms organised from the global cultural market with their anchorages and co-narratives in state policies. Finally, I set out the challenge of rethinking our artistic and

dramaturgical practices in dialogue with a decolonial critique of the South American artistic field.

Keywords: dramaturgical practices, contemporary dance, creation processes, internal colonialism, artistic field, university field, Río de la Plata

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What if all that was left was dramaturgy?

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This article is an attempt to unravel some of the keys which, based on the observation of and participation in diverse creation processes, I perceive are shaping the approach of contemporary dance to dance dramaturgy. I am interested in considering such practices as builders of a theoretical approach or dramaturgical paradigm and not the reverse. The invitation is to consider contemporary dance dramaturgy as a *theory of and in action* rather than a theory from which practices derive, as the traditional approaches to this issue assume. In this way I distance myself from the premise according to which the text or the dramaturgical theory would come *before* the practices to propose the inverse based on the observation of and participation in creative processes of contemporary dance. In parallel, I endeavour to intertwine these reflections with the open question about how this web of practices and operations can dialogue with, influence or allow itself to be permeated by other fields and languages and, at the same time, how we view other ways of doing in dance from this set of practices, ideas and guidelines called contemporary dance.

I am not going to present a history of the term *dramaturgy*, or the dynamics that have drawn relations between different dramaturgical conceptualisations and practices in different languages of the performing arts such as theatre, dance, postdramatic theatre or performance. This is being done by many authors and collectives that from the 2000s have been publishing books and articles that have ignited and fed this line of research.¹

However, the fact that I do not focus this text on this task does not mean overlooking the fact that dramaturgy in contemporary dance is a moment in a process in constant transformation in the relation between dance and movement, writing and choreography throughout the history of art and dance,

1. Some references and background can be found in Bellisco et al., 2011; Corradini, 2013; Profeta, 2015; DeLahunta, 2000, or a large number of articles available on diverse websites. Notable among these is the SARMA website, started in 2000 by the Brussels-based artist Myriam van Imschoot and Jeroen Peeters, which since then has been promoting, posting and curating diverse activities around the issue of dramaturgy in the field of the live arts and especially dance.

and, therefore, it needs to be situated historically, geographically, economically and politically so it can be reflected upon.

Next, I will try to lay the foundations of why I understand dramaturgy in contemporary dance as the organising core of a new epistemology for dance built from this field or language, an epistemology that has been embraced and fed by the generation and community of artists that I form part of (and also with whom I disagree in some respects).

Dramaturgy in Action: “Everything Happens in the Body, Everything Happens in Relation”²

Faced with the impossibility of defining what *dramaturgy* is due to its polysemy and the characteristics of the field of contemporary dance — more interested in destabilising and deconstructing concepts than in defining them, sometimes sustaining a narrative about itself as “aparadigmatic” —, I will attempt to describe some dramaturgical practices observed in creation processes in dance in which I have been involved directly and/or indirectly. The following are not intended to be universal and true postulates in their entirety, but to describe modes of operativity and aesthetic focuses that, by engaging dialogues between theoretical approaches and artistic practices, have been constructing a set of ideas on dramaturgy that I identify as a prevailing paradigm in the field of contemporary dance. The aim is to map out, based on my artistic experience — in my own processes or others in which I have been involved —, connections between dramaturgical practices and theories on creation and research processes in contemporary dance.

Dramaturgy Is Neither a Role Nor a Function; It Is a Way of Understanding Creative Processes

From the idea of creation in contemporary dance that has been forged since the 1960s, dramaturgy is not just another poetics (alongside lighting, choreography or design). The debate about dance dramaturgy in last few decades has forged a series of practices that have resituated and displaced the “variations of importance” (Despret, 2022) and the focuses of attention on dance creation to put dramaturgy at the centre, whether or not that is what it is called.

As contemporary dance shifts away from the obligation of the starting text and also from the desire for notation, dramaturgical thought has come to displace notions such as choreography or movement as keys to the uniqueness of the expressive medium of dance. As in some stage languages, *choreography* is not just another element of dance but a whole way of understanding it; dramaturgy plays a similar role in contemporary dance. In this context, dramaturgy is a key concept to open the door to a whole worldview of dance.

2. These are two of the characteristics that we mapped out in “Un arte que se piensa en la acción”, the title of an article written together with Tamara Cubas in 2008, from which in retrospect I understand that some of the guidelines introduced there continued to be developed and asserted in the field of local contemporary artistic practices, permeating the dramaturgical practices of the Río de la Plata community linked to dance.

From this perspective, dramaturgy is not essential; but what is essential is the place it occupies in the conceptual network that organises a whole set of practices based on a series of agreements and conventions — sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, sometimes disputed, sometimes hegemonic — which today we call contemporary dance. This place is occupied by other concepts in other historical moments and other dance languages. The point is that one concept has not simply been replaced by another; these conceptual transformations account for deeper changes and differences than merely terminological ones in and between aesthetic, epistemological and expressive paradigms underlying different worldviews and dance practices. The question that emerges as significant then is: What kind of dance places the concept of dramaturgy at the centre of thinking about creation, and what effects does this conceptual organisation have on dance practices, aesthetics and education?

1.

As a technology of thinking in dance, dramaturgy serves to promote processes that pay attention to the process itself.

If we consider — at least provisionally and for contemporary dance — dramaturgy not as a subpoetics, nor as a particular craft of the performing arts or as a defined role within a creative process, and we start to see it as an approach or orientation for dance creation, it is no longer characterised by the desire to improve techniques of expression, no longer by that gaze that seeks to look “from outside” to help organise, no longer by being the guiding thread or the subject of the piece, no longer by randomly replacing the author, no longer by the abandonment of choreographic composition in favour of the study of expanded choreography, but by the question of the limits imposed on a process by the desire for control over it. In other words: how do we arrange the materials of a creative process when we want to value the process more than control its final product? The influence of the debates on arts and research arise at this point and permeate the dramaturgical practices of contemporary creation.

In the midst of a review and dispute process about the validated methods of scientific research and with the open question about the singularities of artistic research, contemporary dance, as a discipline increasingly embedded in and influenced by the university field, maintains a critical perspective on the rigidity of the scientific method while it diverges from the arbitrariness of the traditional modalities of artistic creation and dance, often centred on the originality, genius, ego or whim of choreographers or directors.

In contrast with at least those two perspectives and in dialogue with epistemic revolutions in the artistic field and other fields of knowledge, dramaturgical thinking invites us to intensify the relations between creation and research, arguing the need for situated methodological designs. This would imply no longer applying a premade package of procedural solutions, recipes or creation techniques, to negotiate processes attentive to the needs of the process itself. In this way, dramaturgy in contemporary dance places the

creation processes very close to research practices. But far from accepting a submission to established scientific paradigms, it claims a methodological experimentalism that favours the potential of each process. Dramaturgy frames creation in dance as research, and especially as research on creation. From this perspective, the uniqueness of each question or set of materials would be the guide for the deployment of strategies, tools and processes in non-prefabricated arrangements. One of the effects of this philosophy is that, in creation processes in contemporary dance, dramaturgy has the role of generating a reflexivity that allows us to research how we create, and also what type of interventions follow or deviate from the needs of the process (and how to ensure that the identification of these needs does not end up being equally arbitrary). Thus, each creation is an observation in itself about how to listen and lend relevance to what is being researched, rather than to the desires, habits and preconceived expectations of the artists before starting the processes.

Lepecki, one of the theoreticians of this movement, says:

... dramaturgy as a practice proposes the discovery that it is the work itself that contains and possesses its own sovereignty, its performative desires, its longings and its demands. The work is the lord and master of its creative force. In this respect, the dramaturg does not work for the choreographer or for the dancers or for, or with, the collaborators; he works for, and with, the piece (Bellisco et al., 2011: 171).

Dramaturgy from this perspective is the art of making decisions without imposing a form or decision on the process or the materials that make up a process. The underlying belief is that nothing interesting will come from prefabricated methodologies or formulas, and hence we have to research in dialogue with the uniqueness of each process. In other words, a de-automation exercise must be carried out to allow the new to emerge. This implies an exercise in estrangement from what *dramaturgy* can mean, an exercise that must be carried out again and again.

2.

Dramaturgical thinking in contemporary dance produces a division of work within the creative processes that starts from the objective that dramaturgy neither comes before — as traditionally happens in theatre — nor after — mutilating and neglecting the needs of the process when it reaches the phase of the final decisions on the “staging”.

In other words, the process is guided by the desire to avoid a scission between experimentation and decision-making. According to this way of arranging the processes, dramaturgy differs in that it is a logical or observational perspective, and sometimes becomes a role defined and occupied by someone with the purpose of entering into dialogue with other strata or layers of the process and so contribute to other things being able to go together.

At least two philosophical foundations of contemporary dance appear interwoven in this division of labour within the creative processes: the commitment to body thinking (*pensamento do corpo*), and theories about the event, as organising principles of action that incite processes of de-organisation of relations between bodies, objects, and human and non-human subjects.

At this point, historical learning emerges, as does the aesthetic and political differentiation of contemporary dance with respect to dance paradigms operative in other choreographic languages and their modes of creation.

In the first place and nurtured by approaches such as those of Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida, Jacques Rancière, Helena Katz, Christine Greine, André Lepecki, there is the perception that body thinking can be blocked by an excessively rationalistic organisation or conceptualisation of the creative process. If all decisions are taken outside of body experimentation, there is no room for the emergence of the cognitive and philosophical singularity of *dance as “body thinking”* (Katz, 1994), which reproduces the subalternity that non-verbal/non-logocentric thinking has had in the history of dance and, in general, of human culture. One of the tasks of dramaturgical practices in contemporary dance is to protect listening to that body thinking that emerges or is the starting point of creations, as well as being one of its interlocutors without trying to translate it. The latter is particularly relevant, since dramaturgy places its practice at this borderland between conversation and what cannot be said, between discursive reflexivity and the discourse that needs to be arranged based on somatic, poetic, choreographic and non-verbal logics. This hybridity is promising and defines any choreographic language of conceptual contemporary dance, but at the same time runs the risk of recreating dichotomies that contemporary dance itself has tried to combat, such as those of nature-culture or body-language.

The challenge for this contemporary dramaturgy is precisely to sustain that bordering space where you cannot and do not want to have to opt for one of the two sides: neither absolute undecidability, nor absolute translatability. The emergence in the field of stage practices of multiple publications that reflect on the liminal is no coincidence, and has among its exponents researchers such as Antonio Prieto Stambaugh (2007), Ileana Diéguez (2009), José Sánchez (2011) or Marie Bardet (2012) and that permeate the thinking about dramaturgy that shifts between the communities of creators of contemporary performing arts.

In the second place and through this approach to the body, the dramaturgical thinking of contemporary dance embraces the project of de-hierarchisation of the human with respect to other species, materials and objects, since in order to understand the events that surround and affect us a retraction of human subjectivity is necessary as an organiser of the political, poetic and aesthetic worldviews. Criticisms of anthropocentrism are allied at this point with criticisms of logocentrism prevailing at the same time within anthropocentric culture. If language does to human bodies what humans do to other species, it is necessary and urgent to disarm the modern conceptions of the subject that are at the base of the two ideologies. For this,

dramaturgy would have the purpose of collaborating not so much with the artists or the director of the piece, but with the materials and bodies (human and non-human) that are encountered and emerge during the research process. Philosophers like Sara Ahmed (2006) and her notion of disorientation and queer objects, or Donna Haraway (2013) with her characterisation of situated thinking and posthumanist reflections on the place of problems in the processes of creating thought, are key references for approaching the way in which the dramaturgy of contemporary dance would have the task not of organising the stage action, but of creating conditions for the action to happen with the partly unpredictable power of the event.

Allowing to happen more than doing would be the slogan embedded in a dramaturgy that dialogues with the bodies, materials, objects and relations that participate in a process rather than with the artists. Although the philosophy of the event is not new or unique to this field – entire books have been devoted to it for decades –,³ its reading from the performing arts and the body open a wide range of effects on contemporary dramaturgical research. What happens and is part of the event cannot be planned or addressed exhaustively by language: therefore, creation in dance would have the challenge of enabling the conditions for it to occur. This has effects on another practice that is at the core of contemporary creation: composition. The question that opens up and continues dancing is: what type of compositional strategies can enter into dialogue with a dramaturgy of the event, of sensations, of intensities, of experiences in/of relation?

3. Dramaturgical thinking in contemporary dance resists authorship understood as the director or choreographer having control over the process.

If the process of creation and research itself is valued to the point of de-hierarchising the relationship with the subjective expression of artists, the practice of authorship is radically dislocated. This movement implies that the creators no longer make materials or work on materials, but that bodies, dances and subjectivities allow themselves to be made. From this approach, the dramaturgy of the piece needs to be organised by listening to the materials, the spaces and the bodies in relation in order to allow them to manifest themselves. What matters is what happens and how it happens, not what it means (Sontag, 1996) and in that respect an approach from the “themes” becomes less relevant as a starting or reference point for the decisions to be taken before, during or after the creation. This substitution of one focus for another can be seen in historical perspective if we compare the current ideology of dramaturgy in contemporary dance with classic publications such as *The Art of Making Dances* (1959), a book in which Doris Humphrey attaches great importance to the themes explored by a creation. In this text,

3. Blanchot, Badiou and Derrida, among others, have produced since the last decades of the 20th century a philosophy of the event that has undoubtedly revolutionised the practices and theories linked to the live arts and the stage.

in which a series of principles that have guided and continue to guide much of choreographic creation are condensed, the word dramaturgy does not appear and what matters are the themes that each dance seeks to address and convey. If we are guided by that logic, choreographers would have the task not only of deciding on a theme but of taking all the correct decisions for its “good treatment”.

In contrast, texts such as “Dejar de, dejar ser”, by Paz Rojo, provide a thinking that dialogues with many dramaturgical practices in contemporary dance and their effects on the place of authorship for a contemporary dance that wishes to disperse the decision-making processes and dislocate the logic based on hierarchical structures of roles in the traditional modalities of the creative processes. If the criticism of the artistic creation paradigms that were based on the expression of a special subject was the target of a series of reflections and practices that led to what today we call contemporary dance, Rojo accurately describes the way in which the artistic field in alliance with capital manages to recompose the (re)capitalisation of the subject as one of the most profitable and dynamic commodities in circulation. In her text, Rojo observes:

Today, the production of subjectivity — through the condensation of the value of the “subject brand” — and its constant crisis represents the main capitalist production. In this way, self-production — as a form that can be valued by capital and all its strategies of evaluation, accumulation and speculation — has become an end and the only guarantee of existence. A regime of visibility — at least virtuous — that establishes the corporate, and certainly democratic, sanction of moving in a hyper-relational environment in which our affective, cognitive, sensitive and social capacities adopt the mechanics of a totalisation, which, far from liberating us, places us in a paradox: while we continue living in a system of sophisticated production that allows the production of new subjectivities, we find no other alternative but the fear of being excluded from the domain of the possible, therefore, from a future, which in reality no longer needs us. In this scenario, how do we move and for what are two methodological questions that allow us to differentiate the movement that reproduces these neoliberal logics, from the movement capable of unleashing itself and as such. (Page 3)

This movement, “capable of unleashing itself”, and its proposal to create “choreographies without being,” are interesting for rethinking and observing dramaturgical strategies aimed at decentering from the subject to the process of creation, not only to deconcentrate the authorial power of the choreographer but also to evade the inertia by which postmodern subjectivity is recaptured and recommodified in other terms but with similar effects due to the capitalisation of the figure or status of the artist (a dynamic that is already present in the artistic field and revitalised by the appearance of social networks). If priorities are determined by the needs of self-selling and promotion, movement, materials and thinking themselves are again subordinated or in second place. Would dramaturgy be a possible strategy to blur

the prominence of the commodifiable subject towards the creation of a movement that “does not need us”?

(...) “*dejar de*” (stop) and “*dejar ser*” (letting be) are the reverse and obverse of the same action. A double movement in which “a refusal and an opening” coincide at the same time. Therefore, to “stop” connecting to any known structural consistency (choreography), opens the possibility of “letting be” to a presence that, as a being in a situation, is radically included through its inclinations, determined inclinations (movement). Or, in other words: “moving” necessarily implies inhabiting the distance that exists between what is being and its predicates. “Choreographic movement” is not “movement”. The movement does not need us. (Page 7)

Paying attention to the needs of the process more than those of the creative subject has effects on the practices around authorship and therefore around the organisation of dramaturgical materials. It should also be said that the proposal is full of paradoxes and challenges considering that art professionals find themselves in situations and modes of production that create increasing levels of precariousness and competition. If we want a dramaturgy not oriented by or towards the subjects, what place is there for the subjects that put the body into the dramaturgy? In other words, the other side of this critique of the centrality of the human subject is the risk of a de-subjectivisation of the artistic process in a neoliberal context in which automation processes accelerate and hang over the most diverse fields of production.

4.

The project of emancipation of the spectators enunciated and promoted from philosophy, postdramatic theatre and contemporary dance shapes many of the dramaturgical practices of the performing arts in the present.

Every dramaturgical approach implicitly carries some theory about the relation between work, artists and spectators. Many of the most traditional approaches to dramaturgy understand that this relation must be functional in an efficient communication with the audience, having the work as a means to that end. From this perspective, one of the functions of dramaturgy is to act as an interlocutor between the internal gaze of the process and the external gaze of the audience to ensure that compositional decisions work with the transmission of stories, thoughts or content in dialogue with the objectives of the artists and their “projects”. In 2010 Jacques Rancière with his text *The Emancipated Spectator* challenged the consensus that supported many of the conventions about the work-spectator relationship of the artistic field with transformative consequences in the practices and role of dramaturgy.

In his interventions, Rancière draws on contemporary art and at the same time disseminates and expands criticisms already raised in the 1960s by philosophers such as Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Susan Sontag in *Against Interpretation* (1969) or Yvonne Rainer in her *No Manifesto* (1965).

What their reflections have in common is that they aim their criticisms at the hegemonic models of artistic communication that would be mediated by logics of the spectacle that would desensitise the audience, by trying not only to give them the digested contents but also to control and foresee the meanings and experiences that this audience would have from different works and staging.

The dramaturgical thinking present in much of contemporary dance creation embraces this criticism and tries ways of deviating from spectacular logic, resituating the place of dramaturgy to be no longer in dialogue with an imaginary spectator to whom we would like this or that thing to happen, but with an artistic thinking that needs to be faithful to itself and its processes, and trust in the learning capacity of the people with whom the work would seek to establish a non-hierarchical relationship, abandoning the attempt to manipulate (its effects on) the receiving audience.

A non-desensitising dramaturgy would thus be one that, in dialogue with the internal needs of the processes, would cease to serve the demand for intelligibility and aesthetic tastes of a certain community of spectators or the market. This movement, which is fundamentally guided by political motivations and by a revolution in the understanding of the relationships between aesthetics and politics — which would be reconfigured as a dispute over the distribution of the sensible —, paves the way for the continuation of a project that is however not new: that of avant-garde experimentalism that characterised the dynamics of the artistic field throughout the 20th century. How does the desensitising project embraced by the dramaturgy of contemporary dance differ from the contempt for popular taste that characterises many of the artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century?

I understand that this question is a challenge to the project of de-spectacularisation of contemporary art, a project that in its turn coexists with the enormous expansive force of a popular culture that is being besieged by a global market of mass cultural consumption that in an increasingly efficient way formats the distribution of the sensible.

If dramaturgy is not at the service of the spectators, if in its turn it resists the demand of a market in terms of making decisions that dialogue with the well-established cultural consumption habits to achieve a “good arrival” and sales successes, if its alternatives involve eluding the mass markets to propose counterhegemonic sensitivities, we are faced with an aesthetic political project based on a desire for social transformation that is valid and consistent. However, if such a project results in aesthetics and scenarios that rather than breaking through take place in a marginal (or minority) way and parallel to the sensitivities that arrange daily ways of life and consumption of multiple communities, the risk emerges of elitism or also of self-elitism, from which contemporary art is at the same time trying to unlink itself. Which dramaturgy would be capable of emancipating the spectators without losing their attention even before trying? Which dramaturgical practices committed to a critique of the spectacularisation of life can be heard in the hustle and bustle of the media onslaught within which art is trying to make and hold on to a space?

In other words, how to protect dramaturgical research from the demand of the market and industry of the spectacle, on the one hand, and the demands for innovation in the artistic field, on the other, without drawing on vanguardist or modernist arguments based on defence of the autonomy of art or the independence of the expressive medium?

5. If for much of contemporary dance it is urgent to displace the focus of the artistic practice from producing shows to creating experiences, what does dramaturgy have to do?

One of the operative consensuses in contemporary art — mapped out and proposed by reflections such as those of Arthur Danto (1995), André Lepecki (2009) and so on — consists of displacing the expressive force of art, whose power would now be in the phenomenological and philosophical arenas. In keeping with this reterritorialization, dramaturgy is no longer a mode of arranging the *stage action* to become a set of tools for *composing experiences*.

The boom in reflecting on dance dramaturgy and the (re)emergence of this concept and the concomitant role within the creative processes means that dramaturgy is restored through a process of resignifications. One of the possibilities enabled by this movement is that the artists — choreographers and performers — can go on experimenting without having to be concerned about structural gazes. If art is the art of composing experiences, identifying dramaturgy as responsible for maintaining a distant proximity or a close distance with the materials allows those in this role to intensify states of immersion and profound experimentation in the materials without “compositional” concerns.

From this approach, dramaturgy would be a mechanism created to maintain a “peripheral vision” (Garcés, 2009) with respect to the materials. And dramaturgy would cease to be a technology to arrange the stage action to become the art of composing experiences. We could allude to this dramaturgical thinking of contemporary dance as a dramaturgy of experiences. What is the place of the gaze of the spectators and that of the dramaturgs faced with this critique?

If we follow Marina Garcés, deconstructing the centrality of the gaze *does not involve pulling out our eyes but rather letting our eyes fall on the body based on the notion of peripheral vision*. In her article “Visión periférica: ojos para un mundo común” Garcés (2009) states:

After all we have seen, it is clear that it is not their eyes that lock the spectator in separation and passivity but rather the historical and political conditions that have shaped our gaze upon the world. (...) The spectator does not need to be saved, but we do need to conquer together our eyes so that they, instead of putting the world in front of us, learn to see the world that exists between us. We need, both from the visual and performing arts practices and theoretical practices, to find modes of intervention that enable our eyes to elude the focus

that directs and controls their gaze and learn to perceive everything that questions and eludes the agreed visibilities. Today it is not about thinking about how to make people participate (the spectator, the citizen, the child...) but how to get ourselves involved. The gaze involved is neither distant nor isolated in the consumption of its passivity. How can we approach it?

If the role of dramaturgy is to sustain a singular gaze on the materials that are made and unmade in a process, we could link many of the dramaturgical practices to Garcés' conceptualisation about the peripheral vision... But this "is not an overall vision. It is not a panoramic vision. It does not summarise or overfly. Rather the contrary: it is the sensitive eye's ability to inscribe what it sees in a field of vision that exceeds the focalised objective" (Garcés, 2009).

If we consider dramaturgy as an exercise in peripheral vision, it no longer distinguishes itself for being that total, global, structural gaze responsible for ensuring the coherence and cohesion of each artistic project but is practised as a sensitive and possibility erratic action, located on a diffuse border where the traditional divisions *between* the distance of an analytical gaze and the involvement of an experiential approach are disobeyed and expire.

But while the dramaturg's work can be related to the practice of observation, it is also traditionally related to the exercise of writing (or playwriting). In the section "¿Escribir?", of her book *Pensar con mover*, the French-Argentinian dance philosopher Marie Bardet cites Laurence Louppe in his approach to the opening of possible variations that exist between the concepts of composition and choreographer in contemporary dance. What happens if we look at the dramaturgical practices in light of this mode of understanding the composition or choreography practices in contemporary dance? Louppe, cited by Bardet, states:

In fact, composition in contemporary dance takes place based on the emergence of the dynamics in the matter. Rather than from a mould given from outside. Terminology is always interesting in what it reveals underneath the words (or the acts) of a ballet teacher who used to say that he "arranged" a dance. Contemporary choreographers "compose", which is different. They do not "arrange"; rather the contrary: they act and alter things and bodies to discover an unknown visibility (...). In any case, they create their material, assemble it, but above all dynamic it, they work a provisional chaos in the secret network of lines of force (Louppe, 2012).

If dramaturgy no longer assists the choreographers in the "arrangements" of the choreography, it becomes closer to the disorder and the emergence of unlikely relations and alliances than to the search for coherence and legibility. Dramaturgy from this perspective is the (i)logic that strings together the "provisory chaos in a secret network of lines of force" (Ibid.).

6.

The boom of dramaturgy is related to the emergence in the artistic field of a type of *dance professional or professional artist* that results from the insertion at a global level of dance in the university, as well as mutual spillovers and influences between artistic practices, academic practices and competition dynamics for creation funds.

When we see the training careers of many of the key figures that have given a new meaning to the dramaturgical craft in relation with contemporary dance practices we often find academics in dialogue with the artistic field and with artists trained academically. The multiplication of these training and professional performance careers in dance reveals a community with long experience in the university environment but usually with little connection with the independent artistic field, which is often taken as a “subject matter”. This distance has been problematised in many ways, as studying the artistic practices from academia is not necessarily synonymous with introducing or giving room to the artistic thinking within the university framework. Because of their hybrid character and lack of determination, dramaturgical practices are paths of social insertion for profiles of artists training in academia, which enables a series of meta-stage collaborations that put into play many of the tools that can be crossed over in artistic and academic research processes.

This process of emergence of this type of dance professional — which is part of the multiplication of university training in dance that has been taking place in some of the global capitals where cultural resources tend to be concentrated — contributes to a greater dilution of the borders between performing arts and conceptual and philosophical approaches, and to the densification of the relation of dance with theory, which in its turn acts as a stimulus for academisation. Academia in its turn embraces the increasing complexity and specialisation of “conceptual” contemporary dance, which enters into competition with other forms of dance academisation based on technical training, body discipline and compositional rigour, which propose and promote a deepening of the conceptual work of a dance that sees itself as “body thinking” (Katz, 1994).

Along with this process, it is possible to believe that the relation between dance and writing, formulated and re-signified as dramaturgical thinking by contemporary dance, has been dynamized, at least in the Southern Cone, by one of the most financially sound mechanisms of those available in the local field of production in dance: Iberescena.

Iberescena (Fondo de Ayudas para las Artes Escénicas Iberoamericanas) was created in November 2006 and brings together Latin American countries with Spain and Portugal in a single network whose objective is the development of the performing arts in the countries involved.

I put forth as a hypothesis that bodies such as Iberescena⁴ have intervened in the modes of production in the field of dance, as in their calls for

4. <<http://www.iberescena.org/institucional/que-es-iberescena>>.

creation funds they request the submission of a dance script. This has been a stimulus — financial rather than creative — to include writing and theoretical thinking in the process, as well as to reopen the question of what kind of “writing” is that of a dance not based on texts or arranged in terms of choreographic scores but rather states, mottos or intensities.

Sometimes we believe that the evolution of an intellectual or aesthetic field depends on the aesthetic or ideological choices and decisions, but more often the economic side plays a key role. Taking into account that Iberescena is one of the main institutions that contribute to the steady and international development of contemporary dance, that many artists rely on this fund to support not only occasional projects but long-term projects such as festivals, networks, and so on, and that many of these artists wrote a dance script for the first time for Iberescena, the links between the characteristics of the calls of this body and others — which in dialogue with European dramaturgical traditions request the submission of a script as a requisite for funding — and the transformations in the conceptualisation of what we understand by dramaturgy seem quite clear.

Another way of reflecting could open if we consider the role that the writing of projects is playing in the transformation of the field.⁵ As competitive funding becomes increasingly fiercer and it adopts as a requisite the submission of a project, a whole process of professionalisation has emerged in this type of task. This phase of generation of the project prior to the start of the creative process has an effect not only on the conditions of production of contemporary dance but also on the terms in which an artistic project is conceived and the timelines that organise the production of knowledge in dance. Perhaps contemporary dance has adapted better than other languages to perfection in the realisation of projects, partly because of the approaches to academia, and partly because it is a language whose population usually has a socio-educational and economic level higher than that of the artists in other fields. This is again problematic if we focus on who and what remains outside this process of growing professionalisation and competitiveness that has a strong impact on the field of the performing arts in Río de la Plata.

Among the effects of these transformations, we find the reiteration of the colonialist dynamics by which a new trend or professional profile emanates from training and research centres, which lay the foundations for the criteria that guide the training, creation, debates and reflections in the south. What other things are we considering when thinking about dramaturgy, writing scripts or assembling “projects”? What other names or concepts would open alternative modes of thinking about creation? What roles, practices or priorities could occupy the place occupied today by dramaturgy in contemporary creation in dance if academia had not been responsible for commanding updating processes within the performing arts? What parameters for the rules of competitive funds could be taken from the practices of creation and dramaturgy of Latin American dances, social dances or community dances

5. An excellent critique of this project mode and its effects on dance thinking has been produced by Helena Katz in her article “Projeto-processo-produto: uma proposta evolucionista para rever o projeto artístico” (2011).

in different regions of Latin America? What does the requisite of writing include and leave out, and which pedagogies and disciplines are orchestrating these modes of funding and recognition of the artistic field?

In this respect, I believe that rather than asking “how dramaturgical creation adapts to the phases of deployment of a choreographic project,”⁶ it is necessary to approach dramaturgy as it is practised in contemporary dance as a *variable series of principles or operations for the deployment of choreographic projects in the present*, conditions on which many factors and institutions have an effect.

7.

Between what remains of dramaturgy and that only dramaturgy remains: or closing reflections.

I was surprised to receive the invitation to write about dance dramaturgy. For me it was always an issue on which, regardless of how much I read or heard, I did not manage to process or understand definitively, even acting as “dramaturg” in some processes. In perspective, I read this incapacity as a gesture of resistance — conscious or not — faced with a paradigm to which, although it impregnated my own practices, I did not want to surrender completely. Perhaps this invitation confronted me with a pending task: to consider and put into words the reason for this distance or disagreement.

I am a dance artist and researcher based in Uruguay after approximately eight years of training abroad. This itinerancy, along with other movements characteristic of and in the field of dance, have made me increasingly perceive and situate my artistic, teaching, theoretical and militant practices in dialogue with Latin American dances, and I situate my thinking and practice in the context of the south, specifically in Río de la Plata. Reflecting on dance from and along the dances, bodies and realities here has marked my professional career and also my aesthetic and political inclinations. I do not understand the Latin American perspective from an essentialism of the cultural identity of the continent, but it has been a portal for the opening of multiple issues linked to colonialism, racism, classism and other power relations implicit in the European worldviews of dance that, although in the past they were invisible, in recent years they have (re)shaped my gaze on processes, practices and artistic theories.

When in 2011 I began my PhD in Michigan I remember that I read in English one of the first texts on dance dramaturgy. Over the years the term ceased to be a word to become a collective mode — that of contemporary dance that circulates in certain outstanding spheres of the artistic field — of reflecting on stage creation. Today I dare to write that dramaturgical thinking is a key term to refer to a conceptual approach of dance creation.

Situating myself again, as a South American academic, as a materialist of thinking who does not forget that intellectual relations are economic and political relations, I believe that contemporary dance dramaturgy comprises

6. Retrieved from: <<https://sites.google.com/institutdelteatre.cat/simposio22/esp/ejes-de-debate?authuser=0>>.

ways of doing, thinking, feeling and creating that presuppose common understandings about creation which, in their turn, involve research practices and stage practices based on intensities, sensations and relations that are a whole paradigm or worldview about creation in dance. Without denying their potentialities, I believe that these are running the risk of being ethnocentric and totalitarian if they are universalised as a unique possible mode of creation in dance; more so if they eventually consider other forms as backward, precarious, “commercial” or desensitised in their ways of doing and being.

Today and through a self-critical gaze, I understand the debate on dramaturgy in the South American field as part of our sensitive and artistic education in a field permeated by a multiplicity of gestures that are characteristic of our internal colonialism, and of the desire to be up to date with the latest trends to enter into dialogue with theoreticians that promote and regulate conceptual movements that are enormously influential and determining for the dance artists in the south. However, as a contemporary dance artist, I find myself within this paradigm of dramaturgical thinking and immersed in ambiguities, halfway between recognition of their potentials and their problems, which I write about on these pages.

From what I have tried to write so far, we could deduce that dramaturgy is the new “art of making dances” (Humphrey, 1950), the new *labanotation* (Laban) or what remains after embracing the expanded choreography and realising that the world is made up of the performances of operations that are designed and can be dramaturgically transformed. Answering the question of whether dramaturgy has replaced the concept of choreography or whether it is another way of approaching it is not my objective. I believe that the practices are built on concepts, but they can also change vehicles to follow their journeys in a dynamic of ongoing movement between experiences and languages. The paths outlined by these itinerances are precisely those that guide my artistic and academic interests.

Faced with the diagnoses of “exhausting dance” (Lepecki, 2009) and the exhaustive exploration of the possibilities opened by the concept of expanded choreography, we are left with dramaturgy. This is visible in many pieces that give us more than a virtuous movement, more than shows that seek to move, more than kinesic reflections based on somatic research, a painstaking and subtle study of the operations characteristic of dance, as well as from the decisions and relations that make up the mode of knowledge that live arts produce. From this approach of dramaturgy, the *compositional operations* are the core of the creative interest and not just a medium for another end.

Faced with this panorama, at least in the field of the most hegemonic contemporary dance, the time has perhaps come to change the question of whether there is something left of dramaturgy — in a dance increasingly distanced from the classical parameters that have defined the basic elements of this language —, *in case something other than dramaturgy was left*. If the processes increasingly focus on studying their operations and on generating reflexivity on the decision-making processes themselves characteristic of artistic creation, we could say that today dance is mostly dramaturgy.

The problem then no longer is “whether we are ready for the dramaturge” (Lepecki, 2011), but to what extent we are faced with the universalisation of a particular mode of understanding the role and function of dramaturgy and the dramaturg from contemporary dance. Each stage creation paradigm has its dramaturgy and its way of thinking depending on what and how decisions are made in creation and research processes. Contemporary practices in dramaturgy insist on giving up the attempt at unique or prefabricated recipes to give way to the event in creative research processes. But can the paradigmatic be in itself a paradigm?

If dramaturgy is something unutterable, so unpredictable and unique in each process that it cannot be written, described or taught, its power is linked to the immanence of its practice. At the same time, this quality lays the foundations for a knowledge that is difficult to circulate and socialise, which can end up being elitist and restricted, much more if calling itself “contemporary” relegates to archaic temporalities those approaches that divert from certain agreements that are currently implicitly and explicitly built and successful in the artistic field.

Could thinking and the dramaturgical practices of contemporary dance be translated and spill out to other artistic fields and languages and be influenced by them? What principles or guidelines already underway could be shared and applied to other creative fields and logics? How do creative processes take place in dramaturgical terms from other conceptions, traditions, languages, tools and scenarios of the live arts apart from contemporary dance?

In this tension the different gazes and practices that keep forging decision-making protocols in research, relation and composition vibrate, dance, stumble, try again and exhaust, which from contemporary dance we keep calling *dramaturgy*. If in contemporary dance creation practices we were only left with dramaturgy, the challenge that I predict as urgent to reflect upon is how not to end up alone with (our idea of) dramaturgy, while in the artistic and cultural field it continues to revolutionise its mode of making, thinking about and practising dance.



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