

A critical historical view of modern/contemporary dance in Mexico

Une vision historique critique de la danse modern/contemporaine au Mexique

Una mirada histórica crítica de la danza moderna/contemporánea en México

Roxana Margarita Díaz Castellanos



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/rbep/794>

ISSN: 2237-2660

This article is a translation of:

Una mirada histórica crítica de la danza moderna/contemporánea en México - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/rbep/780> [es]

Publisher

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS)

Electronic reference

Roxana Margarita Díaz Castellanos, "A critical historical view of modern/contemporary dance in Mexico", *Revista Brasileira de Estudos da Presença* [Online], 12 : 1 | 2022, Online since 27 December 2021, connection on 10 May 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rbep/794>



Creative Commons - Attribution 4.0 International - CC BY 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



A critical historical view of modern/contemporary dance in Mexico

Roxana Margarita Díaz Castellanos¹

¹Universidad de Buenos Aires – UBA, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina

ABSTRACT – A critical historical view of modern/contemporary dance in Mexico – This article analyzes some historical accounts by researcher Alberto Dallal about stage dance in 20th century Mexico. Three issues are identified in them: 1) the linearity of history and its teleological division between modern and contemporary dance; 2) the incorporation of the Western categories of *modern* and *contemporary* into the history of Mexican dance to show its development; 3) the explanation of the origin and the occurrence of the dance through certain exemplary individuals. A discursive critique of history is proposed to avoid linearities and hierarchies, and the coexistence of other expressions overshadowed by the dominant narratives is explored.

Keywords: **History. Modern/contemporary dance. Historicism. Colonialism. Individualities.**

RÉSUMÉ – Une vision historique critique de la danse modern/contemporaine au Mexique – Dans cet article nous analysons certains discours historiques du chercheur Alberto Dallal sur la danse scénique du XX^e siècle au Mexique. Trois problèmes y sont identifiés: 1) la linéarité de l'histoire et sa division téléologique entre danse moderne et contemporaine; 2) l'incorporation de catégories occidentales, telles que *moderne* et *contemporaine*, à l'histoire de la danse de scène mexicaine afin d'expliquer son développement; 3) une vision qui explique l'émergence, les transformations et le développement de la danse, au travers du génie et de la virtuosité de certaines personnalités du milieu de la danse. Dans ce travail, nous proposons une critique discursive de l'histoire de la danse qui s'affranchit des linéarités et des hiérarchies, et explore la coexistence d'autres expressions éclipsées par les récits dominants.

Mots-clés: **Histoire. Danse moderne/contemporaine. Historicisme. Colonialismo. Individualités.**

RESUMEN – Una mirada histórica crítica de la danza moderna/contemporánea en México – En este artículo se analizan algunos discursos históricos del investigador Alberto Dallal en torno a la danza escénica en el México del siglo XX. Se identifican tres problemáticas: 1) la linealidad de la historia y su división teleológica entre danza moderna y contemporánea; 2) la incorporación de las categorías occidentales de lo *moderno* y lo *contemporáneo* a la historia de la danza mexicana para mostrar su desarrollo; 3) la explicación del origen y el acontecer de la danza mediante ciertas personalidades ejemplares. Se propone una crítica discursiva de la historia que evite linealidades y jerarquías y explore la coexistencia de otras expresiones opacadas por las narrativas dominantes. Palabras clave: **Historia. Danza moderna/contemporánea. Historicismo. Colonialismo. Individualidades.**

Dance not only represents a hegemonic identity or transmits a structuring disciplinary order, but also expresses a kind of *corporal discursiveness of excess* that almost always says more than it should or would like to.

(Vallejos, 2019, p. 12).

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the history of dance in several Latin American countries, both within the artistic field and in other areas of the social sciences and humanities. Though the history of the form has generally been written by dancers and choreographers, today, other disciplinary perspectives have taken on the task, questioning the traditional ways of writing the history in aspects such as its function, the linearity of the stories told, the sources it draws on, the legitimacy of the discourse, and more.¹

This article focuses on part of the historiography of stage dance in Mexico that developed during the 20th century and, in particular, it analyzes some of the accounts² contained in the following texts: *La danza contra la muerte* (1993a), *La danza en México en el siglo XX* (1994) and *La danza moderna en México* (2013a), all authored by the researcher Alberto Dallal,³ one of the most important figures in dance studies in Mexico, and someone who has left a profound mark on the course of thinking and the historical work of the discipline.

Specifically, this article reflects on three issues identified in the author's historical accounts: 1) the linearity of the history and its teleological division between modern and contemporary dance; 2) the tendency to transpose Western categories of *the modern* and *contemporary* onto the history of Mexican stage dance in order to explain its development, beginning with the arrival of artistic currents from Europe and the United States; and 3) the individualistic view that explains the emergence, transformations and unfolding of dance through essentially attributing them to the genius of certain individuals that were involved.

In other words, in my opinion, underlying this discourse is an approach that is gradual and progressive. It envisions a continuum, along which a division has been established between modern⁴ and contemporary dance to

distinguish a series of artistic movements from Europe and the United States throughout the 20th century.

It is important to clarify that what is known as "modern Mexican dance" refers to the dance of a historical period between the 1930s and 1950s, and is characterized by the execution of narrative dances with popular elements and national culture, promoted by the post-revolutionary state. It is not contemporary Mexican dance, which dates back to the 1960s and continues through the present, with no clear definition of its limits. Broadly speaking, the latter involves a series of dances that move away from the narrative in search of self-referentiality, experimentation and thematic universalization.

At the same time, I believe narratives such as those analyzed in this article not only replicate a linear and historicist model, but may also sustain a vertical perspective that envisages the country as an extension of the aspects of modernity developed in Western dance. In this way, they nurture a history of dance that focuses on the biographies of its leading figures and explains the historical changes as being a consequence of these individual successes, thus obscuring the processes and social relationships that run through them and make them possible.

Although the critical approaches presented throughout this text have already been developed from different angles in studies of dance,⁵ it is important to recover theoretical expressions that allow us to create a dialogue with the historiography of Mexican stage dance and explore some of its epistemological limitations.

Seeking to propose additional readings, I base my arguments on the theoretical precepts of Walter Mignolo (2005), Walter Benjamin (1971), and Michael Foucault (2002), as well as dance researchers such as Mark Franko (2019), Ignacio Vallejos (2014), Eugenia Cadús (2019), Fabián Barba (2011), and Emily Wilcox (2018), among others.

In the course of this paper, I first pause to consider the problematization of the dichotomy between the modern and the contemporary within the history of Mexican stage dance in the 20th century. I then analyze the idea of

importation, which is used as the basis to explain the emergence and unfolding of these dances, as well as the individualistic nature of their content.

The historical teleology of dance in Mexico: from modern to contemporary

Generally speaking, the history of 20th century Mexican stage dance is constructed around the two consecutive and clearly identifiable periods that defined it: the modern and the contemporary.

It is said that the modern dance era (1930-1950) burst onto the scene in the excitement of the post-revolutionary period. The State recognized that art⁶ provided an opportunity to consolidate national unity by means of recovering those elements that were considered to be common to and constitutive of the Mexican identity.⁷ It was an attempt to modernize the country while, at the same time, recovering an *authentic* past consisting of elements from the nationalist and libertarian collective imagination of the time.

It essentially consisted of dances that incorporated techniques considered to be modern or from abroad with nationalistic clichés. Narrative and abstract choreographies coexisted with characters, costumes, scenery, musicality, sounds and visual elements that recaptured popular and indigenous aesthetics and Mexican landscapes. For example, there were references to the lives of monumental figures from national history, pre-Hispanic legends, events such as the armed struggle, and the representation of popular sectors – such as the workers and peasants – who sought to generate a true social transformation for the sake of a promising future.

Meanwhile, the second period of interest for this paper is that of contemporary dance, which tends to be identified as having emerged in the 1960s, and which continues to be practiced today, without any clearly defined limits. Historian Margarita Tortajada states that it originated, among other factors, as a consequence of the weakening of the institutionalised discourses of the earlier nationalism, the emergence of new expressive needs among artists, the arrival of foreign artistic currents, and the development of dance techniques from abroad, primarily the Graham technique (Naser, 2014).

During this period, dance diversified and new concepts emerged, such as postmodernism, which was characterized by a progressive break from the models of representation and any indication of external referentiality, in order to create a dance that was increasingly *pure*.⁸ In the words of Alberto Dallal, contemporary dance involved a search for styles and languages, and the establishment of professionalism, which brought about an expected shift from figurativism to a generalized and even abstract image (1994, p. 122).

The assumption from this logic is that there would be a transition from the modern to the contemporary that would be considered *necessary* for the evolution of dance. This is complemented by another idea embodied in a quote by the same author, in which he argues "[...] there is a more advanced modality of *modern dance* that bears the (equally limited) name of *contemporary dance*, which signifies a break with some rigid and 'academicized' norms of *modern dance*" (Dallal, 1993a, p. 27).

I recognize that establishing these historical periods for the development of dance has favored the study of certain body movements as well as the construction of analytical categories that are used to observe the prevailing changes and particularities at specific historical moments. However, it is important to point out that defining periods and chronologies in a consecutive manner as a means of explaining the evolution of the discipline draws us into a historicist logic⁹ that tends to order the facts according to causal relationships and closed and successive phases.

Under this perspective, the history of stage dance in Mexico would be organized along a linear and progressive continuum based on the modern paradigm, which in Benjaminian terms would result in the exaltation of a homogeneous succession of instants (Benjamin, 1971). That is to say, we would speak of an evolutionary representation of dance, according to which new artistic currents would constantly surpass other, older ones.

It is in this sense that Mark Franko argues that "the most salient feature of the modernist narrative is its progressive journey from expression as spontaneity to expression as a semiological system, to ultimately arrive at the marginalization of the expressive intent" (2019, p. 23-24). Although the history of North American dance to which Franko (2019)¹⁰ refers is very different

from that of Mexican dance, we can still identify in the historic accounts a journey from the narrative and expressive aspects of dance towards the abstraction and abandonment of representation.

That being said, it is very difficult to assert that modern and contemporary dance exist on a continuum, as this implies the belief in static historical periods and homogeneous temporalities. It should be understood that dances are never completely *pure*, nor do they respond to necessarily conscious breaks with respect to previous artistic expressions, but are in constant dialogue with particular socio-political and historical factors.

That is, conceiving a dichotomy between modern and contemporary dance prevents us from seeing the nuances and contextual factors that enabled the practices, creations and techniques employed by the artists. Although a distinction can be made between different dance trends that are more predominant at certain times than others, formalist or abstract elements can be found in a historical period or in an artist's career even in early periods of modern dance, as can narrative or expressive elements be found at times when it would be assumed the transition from modern to contemporary dance would have already occurred.

In this regard, I agree with Fabián Barba (2011), who argues that dance does not follow the same path in all geographic regions. It is therefore important to maintain a certain critical view of historicism and linear history, which separate modern from contemporary dance, presenting the former as something backward and outdated and the latter as something new.

I consider the history of dance to be much more complex, one in which continuums and directions exist, but in which there are also breaks, interruptions, twists and turns. As the following quote suggests,

[...] rather than observing history [...] as a step-by-step development to be described in terms of a cumulative growth, with successive improvements and clearly identifiable points of innovation, it could be studied in its capricious, even haphazard existence in time (Vallejos, 2014, p. 159).

This argument coincides with that of Foucault, for whom

Rupture is not a dead and undifferentiated period that is inserted – if only for a moment – between two manifest phases; it is not a kind of lapse of no

duration that separates two periods and which unfolds from either side of a fissure, like two heterogeneous periods; it is always a discontinuity specified by a number of distinct transformations between two particular positivities (2002, p. 293).

It is thus important to study the history of Mexican dance beyond its beginnings and origins in order to bring to light its accidental, incidental and underlying elements. That is, it would be worthwhile to highlight both the nuances that exist within certain trends and/or historical periods as well as the power relations implicit in them.

For example, nationalist dances do not constitute homogeneous processes. The nationalist imaginary was customized in different ways depending on the social concerns of the time and the cultural policies implemented by the governments of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946) and/or Miguel Alemán (1946-1952). For each of them, the idea of nation and the symbolic elements that accompanied it acquired heterogeneous, even contradictory features.

For example, dances whose themes were linked to the armed movement coexisted, as this was seen a path that, in terms of its political consequences, would lead to the end of inequality and social injustice. One example is Walden's *La Coronela* (1940), in which, through satire, the conflict between social classes is staged, with the peasant sectors represented in their struggle against the abuses of the Porfirian bourgeoisie (Tortajada, 2008). Meanwhile, other productions turned to indigenous views and representations of pre-Hispanic legends that showed the *glorious past*, perceived to be the origin of Mexican culture. An example is *Los cuatro soles* (1951), by José Limón, which "[...] was based on the mythical story recorded in the Vatican Codex, narrating the succession of four eras of the Aztec world" (Hernández del Villar, 2012, p. 118). Choreographies featuring popular traditional elements also represent this trend, such as Guillermina Bravo's *Danza sin turismo* (1955), which incorporated the theme of migration in Mexico.¹¹

However, despite the profoundly nationalistic slant of these dances, there was always a tension between the integration of foreign techniques such as classical ballet, modern German and North American dance, the use of

themes, visual elements and sounds from Mexican culture, and the recovery of movements from native dances.

On the other hand, it is evident that dance diversified in the second half of the 20th century, and increasingly abandoned the state project. Although abstract and minimalist dances emerged, inspired by the North American tendencies of the Judson Church,¹² there were also others, such as dance-theatre, influenced by the school of Pina Bausch, as well as those that did not abandon a narrative direction. Hence the difficulty of speaking of a generation united by a stable thematic or stylistic movement.

For example, independent groups such as the Forion Ensemble sprang up, and their works opened the doors to experimentation and improvisation. One example is Jorge Domínguez's *Paisaje Interior*, a dance in silhouette in which "[...] motionless bodies offered themselves to the light to begin, dance, and return to their visual place" (Dallal, 1980, p. 4).

Other collectives also appeared in the 1980s, such as Barro Rojo, which, though it employed a creative method of experimentation and improvisation, continued to produce anecdotal dances, in the form of dances which sustained a political discourse that denounced social issues, and not only Mexican ones. For example, *El camino*, which recounted certain conflicts derived from the revolution in El Salvador.

Given this scenario, the assertion that modern and contemporary dances occurred in delimited, consecutive periods creates difficulties when it comes to chronicling their histories, since the trends became intermittently visible, depending on the social concerns of each era. There were different stylistic and aesthetic projects, but there were also different ways of mobilizing emotions that coexisted in the same time and historical space.

To conclude this section, it would be worthwhile to reconsider the meaning of the modern and the contemporary in dance in Mexico today. Do they perhaps refer to a series of artistic genres, which, in the first case, would tend more towards the local and narrative and, in the second, towards universalization, formalism and abstraction? Are they characteristics that denote chronological periods? Is the modern an obsolete form in opposition to the contemporary, which as a practice implies constant innovation and a break

from the forms of the past? Or is the contemporary a critical attitude towards artistic practice itself?

The import model of modern/contemporary dance in Mexico

I would also like to consider the historical discourse that argues that modern/contemporary dance in Mexico developed, among other things, thanks to the import of stylistic currents and techniques from Europe and the United States, either through visits or the residence in the country of several figures from the world of dance who had trained abroad.

For example, it is said that the *Mexican modern dance movement* emerged thanks to the 1939 arrival in Mexico of two American dancers and choreographers who would set the course for the discipline: Waldeen von Falkenstein and Anna Sokolow. The former came from the German school of modern dance; the latter, from the North American school, mainly focused on the Graham technique¹³.

These foreign-educated dancers founded ensembles that created new dances, and promoted the professional training of several generations of dancers. As Dallah states, "[...] some of the young dancers who participated in the groups had already travelled to the United States and some European countries and were aware of the breadth and adaptability of the genre" (1994, p. 73).

In fact, according to the author, at that time, "[...] conditions were ripe for the emergence of an authentically Mexican modern dance, a dance that would incorporate Mexican themes into the technical elements that had been developed and disseminated in the United States and Germany by Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Mary Wigman" (2013a, p. 12).

I agree that the arrival of these new artistic currents of dance in Mexico played an important role in the development of stage dance, as it fed into and engaged in a dialogue with other offerings and generated new artistic veins in accordance with its socio-political and historical particularities. However, the question must be raised as to whether transposing the Western categories of modern and contemporary on the development of Mexican stage dance

during the 20th century provides a feasible explanation of the historical reality of the discipline or whether, on the contrary, it feeds a biased vision that prevents us from seeing other stage expressions that do not fit into said schemes.

In fact, to view Mexican stage dance through the lens of modern/contemporary Western paradigms would imply that the development of correlative dances is an extension of the evolution of Western aesthetics. It would imply the idea of a history receptive to foreign innovations.

Were this the case, the history of Mexican dance would not only be sustained by a linear and progressive trajectory, but also a colonialist one, as it would follow a paradigm of modern time that begins in Western countries. According to Mignolo, the consequences of such thinking are "[...] that the world is, in appearance, what European categories of thought (and, later, American ones) allow us to say it is (2005, p. 61). Thus, it is that which is "[...] valid and legitimate as measured according to Western parameters" (2005, p. 66-67).

Continuing with this logic, the modern and contemporary status of dances in Mexico is achieved through the importation of foreign artistic trends that are then interwoven with cultural elements from the region. According to dance theorist Eugenia Cadús, "[...] the dances of the economic and imperialist powers not only gain their place as 'universal' but also become [sic] determinants of the time factor" (2019, p. 150). Thus, other expressions that do not conform to modern and contemporary moulds "[...] become tradition – become part of traditional dances – blunting their aesthetic artistic capacities and their possibilities to be modified and to establish new or different genealogies" (2019, p. 151).

This argument aligns with that of Wilcox, for whom it is problematic "[...] to privilege practitioners of modern and postmodern dance in the writing of dance history most often described as 'global' [...], because it obscures alternative subjects and limits our understanding of dance practices present and past" (2018, p. 161).

To believe that dance has developed along a single trajectory forces us to consider Latin American countries as static entities waiting to see what

happens in the *developed* centers. The truth is that, far from successive and unidirectional lines, we were immersed in a plurality of artistic events and cultural projects that, as they came after and coexisted with each other, they shaped forms that were both unique and extremely diverse (Echeverría, 2000, p. 144).

Given the above, it is my assertion that the notions of the modern and the contemporary are unstable categories, not only because of the vagueness in terms of the temporality they could encompass, but also in terms of the stylistic and aesthetic characteristics that could define them. We would thus have to rethink whether adjusting the Western categories of the modern and the contemporary to certain realities such as Mexican dance contributes to explaining the development of the practice over the past century or if, on the contrary, it requires the notion of it being an extension of Western history.

In any case, it would be worthwhile to move beyond a history of dance that places the emphasis on foreign origins and beginnings in order to bring attention to the power relations that underlie these processes. In a sense, questioning the categories of modernity and contemporaneity in Mexican stage dance brings to light the center-periphery conflict and, therefore, the power relations that motivated this reflection on the ways in which the history of dance has been conceived and written.

The modern and contemporary likely do not offer us sufficient definitions to be able to explain the reality of dance in Mexico, and that is because neither category is impartial, but rather have political and ideological implications (Wilcox, 2018).

Beyond the conceptual inaccuracies, it is important to understand that stage dance in Mexico is not an extension of the history of Western dance, nor is it an inexhaustible sequence of ruptures in which certain artistic trends superimposed themselves upon one another to generate innovative forms.

Instead, it is about visualizing events in dance as histories that converge simultaneously, allowing other agents and genealogies to emerge unattached from modernist developments (Cadús, 2019, p. 159). Accordingly, other possibilities for dialogue between different alternative dance expressions should be welcomed, and the relationship they have with artistic circuits and

with the structural aspects of the society to which they belong should be analyzed.

Individualities in the history of modern/contemporary dance in Mexico

Lastly, I would like to highlight the individualistic tendency of the history, which assumes that the appearance and development of Mexican stage dance took place thanks to the intervention of certain figures who paved the way for its emergence, or for the transition from the modern to the contemporary.

For example, as mentioned above, the creativity of Waldeen and Sokolow is widely considered to be a watershed for the emergence of modern dance in Mexico. In fact, Dallal writes of the former artist:

Among other causes and reasons, Mexico's initiation into modern dance came thanks to the inventiveness, teachings and organizational skills of an American dancer [...] Like the image of the founding fathers in the history of Mexico, Waldeen's image endures in the development of modern dance in the country [...] it corresponds to that of the initiator, the one who shows the way, the one who becomes a liberating example (1993b, p. 41).

As well as those that have already been mentioned, there are many other outstanding figures in the history of modern/contemporary dance in Mexico that could be listed, such as Nellie and Gloria Campobello, Amalia Hernández, Gloria Contreras, among others. One of the most outstanding figures is the choreographer and dancer Guillermina Bravo. As well as having founded the Ballet Nacional de México, she is credited with fostering the transition from nationalist modern dance to contemporary dance. Dallal states that Bravo was an "[...] organizer, relentless ideologist, tireless creator, lucid analyst of the era in which she lived [...] in the chronology of her choreography, she manifests a series of functional transitions related to the changes experienced in modern and contemporary dance around the world" (2013b, n.p.).

These historical discourses show a clear trend that emphasizes individual agencies, trajectories, and initiatives as being the drivers of the changes that take place within the dance sphere. Thus, the history of dance has been

consolidated as a biographical sequence in which the genius and creativity of the artists, the *pioneers of dance*, are exalted as a means of explaining the transformations that took place.

This being the case, there is a narrative in which epic and idealized subjects are described, which move away from the analysis of the collective dimension and of the historical processes that played a role in these transformations. Indeed, "[...] when the assessment of the characters – and their work – is confined to individual actions that then lead to a process of mythification, the resource is weakened and the explanation of historical phenomena appears reduced and biased" (Crespo and Young, apud Izaguirre, 2016, p. 5).

In fact, Izaguirre writes,¹⁴ "[...] we have an anecdotal history of dance, in which what stands out are the characters themselves, wrapped in an aura of heroification, very close to the idealistic models that have characterized different knowledge processes" (2016, p. 16). He highlights the creativity of the artists and their difficulties, as well as their abilities to adapt dance techniques from abroad to the patterns of Mexican culture.

That is not to say that individual creations have not contributed to the development of modern/contemporary dance, but that the emergence and changes cannot be measured in terms of the actions of a single person, and instead are due to broader factors that filter and influence these social practices.

New critical anchors for the history of dance must be generated, ones that break with the conventional descriptions of the lives of artists and their work, in order to analyze how these connect with their social and political conditions. It is not a matter of understanding individualities as genealogies, from the point of view of an unequivocal and original essence, but as "[...] a verification of history as a product of power relations, as an effect of struggles. It is a methodology that implies, in parallel, the conception of stage representation as an *event*" (Vallejos, 2019, p. 17).

In some ways, the way the history of dance has been narrated is also due to certain policies that contrast characters and works that are considered important with those that are not. As such, it is necessary, "[...] to challenge the

canonical exclusivity of the history of dance, [in order to] invoke other forgotten or suppressed alternatives – culturally, aesthetically and politically" (Franko, 2019, p. 216).

In other words, the history of dance must be understood not only through the differences that occur in its practices, but also through the conflicts that are generated within them. We should ask ourselves not only what macro-social factors incentivized certain transformations but also, for example, in what way other dancers and/or artists participated in that process, what role critics and audiences played, as well as what political and cultural circumstances facilitated them.

As Vallejos states,

If at first the history of dance focused solely on the reconstruction of artistic practices – with a particular interest in aesthetic currents, creations, and the techniques employed – today, researchers are interested in much broader and more complex objects: they describe the work of dancers, their insertion in the social world, the objects produced in relation to dance [...], the study of texts in their internal architecture, as well as in their insertion in a specific field (social, economic, cultural) (2014, p. 171).

Thus, the use of other research approaches, epistemological resources and historical sources (such as audiovisual and reenactments¹⁵) can open up new avenues for research into the history of dance that move away from the biographical and personality-based view of dance in order to analyze other sociocultural and political intersections that are at play in its emergence, development and reproduction.

Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, I have analyzed three issues present in Dallal's historical discourses on Mexican stage dance in the 20th century. First, the teleological and progressive orientation that has led the author to divide his account into two specific and consecutive periods of dance: modern and contemporary.

In my opinion, this view leads to difficulties when historicizing the discipline, since conceiving of history as an ascending line implies that it consists

of static stages that come to an end, which thus prevents us from observing the particularities and existence of other dances that are governed by parameters other than the order in which they are placed.

As Banes would say, research does not consist of constructing abstract categories so as to then seek to make reality fit into them. Rather, it consists of understanding a trend as something which emerges from an artistic practice that develops historically and, as such, has its roots in its own time, place and culture (1989, p. 15).

In this sense, it is important to open up history, break free of the chronologies and of the homogeneous timelines that sustain historicism, in order to build a history that includes intermittent temporalities. That is, it is not a matter of "[...] asserting an evolutionary coherence through the identification of an ontological root that explains the progression, it is a matter of emphasizing the rupture, the impossibility of synthesis" (Vallejos, 2019, p. 17). Moreover, it is important to identify the power relations underlying certain processes and to put the practices that have taken place in the history of dance into context.

For example, the period to which modern nationalist dance is assigned was not homogeneous, but took on different features depending on the cultural policies of the governments in office and how artists assimilated their *national* imaginaries. On the basis of this process, it would be interesting to observe the implications of the hegemonic model of modern dance on other alternative expressions, to explore what the use of certain foreign and local themes, techniques and movements meant for nationalist dance, how they interacted with that reality, and what socio-political factors they responded to.

On another note, in my opinion, the second stage of dance – contemporary dance – did not adhere solely to the self-referential and formalist trends derived from the influence of North American post-modernism or other external currents. Rather, it incorporated creative practices within it that continued to be narrative but that co-existed with other themes and characteristics that were more diversified and heterogeneous, depending on

the historical needs of the time, hence the difficulty of establishing static and conclusive periods.

It would be worthwhile to rethink what categories such as modern and contemporary mean in dance today, to consider whether they are divergent dance genres, or adjectives that delimit chronological periods, or ruptures that constantly call into question the expressions that preceded them, as well as to reflect on the resonances between these modes of dance and how the past and present are connected in them. It is important to recognize whether the dance currents known as modern or contemporary involve a freedom of movement or if, on the contrary, they reveal other silenced forms of power.

Likewise, this work was able to identify some other issues that continue to be present in the historical accounts analyzed here. In particular, I wonder if there is a colonialist mindset behind the attempt to fit the reality of Mexican stage dance into modern/contemporary Western paradigms imported from the artistic trends of Europe and the United States.

Although I recognize that external trends made great contributions to the production of dance in Mexico and led to the creation of specific dances, it is important to problematize the categories of modern and contemporary; to do otherwise would replicate a vertical and passive history that would take place in accordance with the arrival of external innovations, in an approach that would involve the exaltation of a linear timeline marked by Western histories, obscuring the coexistence of other stories that sometimes intersect, coexist or confront each other.

Finally, this paper calls into question the idealized vision of dance that is based on epics and personalities as a means to explain the emergence and development of the discipline in Mexico in terms of the individual successes of figures such as Waldeen, Sokolow or Bravo. On the contrary, the evolution of dance is linked to broader historical and political factors, as well as to micro-social dynamics that are linked to the agency of its collectivities.

Broadly speaking, it can be observed how the three discourses on the history of dance are linked to a political dimension through their process of validating the works, lives and trajectories that deserve to be remembered, and defining those that do not merit such recognition. However, they also

reaffirm a vision that continues to run through some historical accounts today, in which, generally speaking, what is conceived as *modern* or *innovative* is that which comes from abroad, but via a meritocratic process that, in a way, neutralizes collective agencies.

The history of dance must be studied from a critical and interdisciplinary approach that avoids essentialisms, linearities and hierarchies. What I propose, instead, is a history that, from theory and practice, recaptures the relevance of the body in the search for a knowledge (Koritz, 2005, p. 81) that gives new meaning to the past from, with, and through the dances.

Notes

- ¹ For example, in the United States, the study of dance has developed into a relevant field thanks to the research of theorists such as Mark Franko, Susan Leigh Foster, Susan Manning, Laurence Louppe, Randy Martin, among others.
- ² This paper also relies on some of the author's historical articles, as specified in the list of references.
- ³ Alberto Dallal (1936) is a Mexican journalist, historian, researcher, promoter of culture and art critic. Currently, he is a researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and a member of the Sistema Nacional de Investigadores del Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (Conacyt). He has been awarded the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize (1982) and the José Limón National Dance Prize (2008) for his career as a critic and researcher.
- ⁴ According to Franko, it is important not to lose sight of the difference between modern and modernism in dance as "[...] a set of aesthetic procedures that are currently under intense critical scrutiny" (2019, p. 23).
- ⁵ Examples can be found by consulting some of the works cited throughout this article, such as Ignacio Vallejos (2014), Eugenia Cadús (2019), Juan Izaguirre (2016), Fabián Barba (2011), among others.
- ⁶ Mexican muralism was an artistic movement that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, following the Mexican Revolution. The movement was led by

several intellectual artists, such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Gerardo Murillo, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and others.

- ⁷ It should be recalled that the country was divided and at war during the Mexican Revolution and thus, in the subsequent period, it was necessary to achieve the unification of the country not just for political reasons, but also for symbolic ones. Although a drive towards nationalism had been brewing since the end of the 19th century, it was in the post-revolutionary period that dance made this trend all the more visible, to the point the era was even known as the golden age of Mexican dance.
- ⁸ Post-modernism is a category that remains problematic in the study of dance but basically alludes to formalist tendencies, "[...] the reflexive rationalization of movement." (Banes, 1989, p. 5). It emphasizes autonomy, self-referentiality and its separation from context.
- ⁹ Historicism is understood as a philosophical current that understands reality as a historical flow taking place within a progressive temporality. However, it has undergone different interpretations and nuances over time, thus making it difficult to establish a unified and precise definition. I agree with Alfonso Mendiola, who identifies the historicist trend "[...] with the time born of the French Revolution: a revolutionary time, marked by radical change, which by definition gives primacy to the future over the present and the past. Within this framework, the radical change introduces a historical *tabula rasa* that interrupts the determination of the past over the present and establishes the future as an open space of possibility" (Cited in Beck, 2017, p. 46).
- ¹⁰ In his book *Danzar el modernismo/actuar la política*, Mark Franko (2019) suggests an approach that contributes to deconstructing the universalist history of dance and its teleological sense: "[...] instead of conceiving of aesthetic change to be the result of progress (modernization), [he argues] that new stylistic practices are the result of internal critiques of the theory of expression" (2019, p. 27).
- ¹¹ Some dances that demonstrate these different nationalist imaginaries can be clearly seen in works such as: *Ballet Simbólico 30-30*, by Nellie and Gloria

Campobello, *La Coronela*, by Waldeen, *La Luna y el venado*, by Ana Mérida, *El Zanate*, by Guillermina Bravo, *El Zapata*, by Guillermo Arriaga, and others.

- ¹² Judson Church was a collective of dancers, composers and visual artists that gathered at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, New York, between 1962 and 1964.
- ¹³ This is a method of dance developed by the American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham in the first half of the 20th century. It is typically characterized by movements that emphasize contractions, twists, relaxations, as well as controlled falls.
- ¹⁴ In his article *La personalización en la historia de la danza en México: un límite en la construcción del conocimiento* (2016), Juan Crisóstomo Izaguirre carries out a critical analysis of personalization in the history of dance in Mexico. His text provides a deep and enriching critique of historiographies based on heroic figures, arguing that personalization is an epistemological obstacle in dance.
- ¹⁵ The term 'reenactment' is usually used to refer to the revival of a choreography. However, according to Barba, it is not a mere illustration or a copy of forms and rhythms, but a practice that involves imagination (2011, p. 86).

References

- BANES, Sally. Terpsichore in Combat Boots. **The MIT Press**, v. 33, n. 1, p. 13-16, 1989.
- BARBA, Fabián. A dancer writes: Fabian Barba on Mary Wigman's Solos. **Dance Research Journal**, v. 43, n. 1, p. 84-89, 2011.
- BECK, Humberto. El acontecimiento entre el presente y la historia. **Desacatos**. Ciudad de México, CIESAS, 55, p. 44-59, Sept./Dec. 2017.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. Tesis de filosofía de la historia. En **Angelus Novus**, Barcelona: Edhasa, 1971. P. 77-89.
- CADÚS, Eugenia. Narrativas dominantes y violencia epistémica en la historiografía de las danzas argentinas: posibilidades de desobediencia. **Intersticios. De la política y la Cultura. Intervenciones Latinoamericanas**, Argentina: Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, v. 8, n. 16, p. 143-166, Dec. 2019.

DALLAL, Alberto. Obras del Forion Ensemble, **Diálogos: Artes, Letras, Ciencias humanas**. Ciudad de México: El Colegio de México, v. 16, n. 3, p. 24-27, May/June 1980.

DALLAL, Alberto. **La danza contra la muerte**. México: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1993a.

DALLAL, Alberto. Waldeen: la fundadora (1913- 1993). **Revista de la Universidad de México**, Ciudad de México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, p. 41-43, Sep. 1993b.

DALLAL, Alberto. **La danza en México en el siglo XX**. México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994.

DALLAL, Alberto. **La danza moderna en México**. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2013a.

DALLAL, Alberto. Guillermina Bravo: la danza total. **Revista Electrónica Imágenes**, Ciudad de México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2013b. Disponible en: <http://www.revistaimagenes.esteticas.unam.mx/guillermina_bravo_la_danza_total>. Accessed on: April 8, 2021.

ECHEVERRÍA, Bolívar. **La modernidad de lo barroco**. Ciudad de México: Ediciones Era, 2000.

FOUCAULT, Michael. **La arqueología del saber**. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2002.

FRANKO, Mark (prólogo de Vallejos, J.). **Danza el modernismo/actuar la política**. Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2019.

HERNÁNDEZ DEL VILLAR, Sureya. **Danza y nacionalismo en México (1931-1956)**. Guadalajara, Jalisco: Centro Universitario de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades/Universidad de Guadalajara, 2012, Maestría en Historia de México.

IZAGUIRRE RUÍZ, Juan Crisóstomo. La personalización en la historia de la danza en México: un límite en la construcción del conocimiento. **Memoria Académica. UNLP-FaHCE**, Argentina, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, p. 1-18, Nov. 2016.

KORITZ, Amy. Re/Moving Boundaries. From Dance History to Cultural Studies". In: MORRIS, Gay (ed.). **Moving words**. London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005. P. 78-91.



MIGNOLO, Walter. **La idea de América Latina. La herida colonial y la opción decolonial**. Barcelona: Editorial Gedisa, 2005.

NASER, Lucía (2014). Entre institucional y plebeya: historias de la danza y la nación mexicana. **2 (DA) Cuadernos de danza**, Buenos Aires, 2014. Disponible en: <http://cuadernosdedanza.com.ar/textosdanzacontemporanea/34/entre-institucional-y-plebeya-historias-de-la-danza-y-la-nacion-mexicana>. Accessed on: 04 Ago. 2021.

TORTAJADA QUIROZ, Margarita. *La Coronela* de Waldeen: una danza revolucionaria. **Revista Casa del Tiempo**, Ciudad de México, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, v. 1, n. 8, p. 54-60, June 2008.

VALLEJOS, Juan Ignacio. Los debates de la historia de la danza: ¿un diálogo imposible? Telón de fondo. **Revista de Teoría y Crítica Teatral**, Buenos Aires, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, n. 20, p. 155-173, Dec. 2014.

VALLEJOS, J. Prólogo. In: FRANKO, Mark. **Danza el modernismo/actuar la política**. Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2019.

WILCOX, Emily. When place matters. Provincializing the global. In: MORRIS, Geraldine; LARRAINE, Nicholas (ed.). **Rethinking Dance History: Issues and Methodologies**. 2ª ed. Londres y Nueva York: Routledge, 2018. P. 160-172.

Roxana Margarita Díaz Castellanos holds a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Latin American Studies from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), with a speciality in Art History (UNAM). She trained as a contemporary dancer at the Centro Cultural Ollin Yoliztli. She is currently a doctoral candidate in History and Theory of the Arts at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) and a scholarship holder at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8864-1694>

E-mail: roxana.maga14@gmail.com

This original paper, translated by Leslie Robertson and revised by Sabrina Eliana Nieto for Abrapalabra, is also published in Spanish in this issue of the journal.

Received April 17, 2021



Approved on August 17, 2021

*Editors-in-charge: Arnaldo de Siqueira Junior, Cassia Navas,
Henrique Rochelle and Ana Mora*

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Available at: <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>>.