

Paula Guzzanti

Documentary Screendance-making as a Practice of Kindness

In this essay I reflect on the mobilization of feelings of kindness as activated in the making of the documentary screendance *El Cuerpo Partido* (The Broken Body). The film integrates the narratives of five Nicaraguan refugees with my experience as dance facilitator working with displaced communities in Costa Rica. Screendance-making emerged as a practice which offered me a methodological approach to dignify the life stories of my workshop participants. Through my writing, I address the ethical and aesthetic considerations of making *El Cuerpo Partido*. From the discussion, I will frame documentary screendance-making as an artistic practice motivated and led by the human need to connect with others through the affective force of kindness. Informed by my personal meditation practice of love and kindness, I will suggest re-thinking kindness not as a quality of being or as a behaviour but, as an inter-relational moving force that energizes radical societal changes. This text is presented along with the film. Together they make a whole that the reader is invited to engage in their preferred order.

El Cuerpo Partido (2020, Dir. Guzzanti & Devek) exposes the corporeality of Nicaraguan refugees living in Costa Rica since the violence that broke out in the country after the anti-government marches of April 2018. The storyline follows my emotional journey as dance facilitator as I try to understand the affects of violence and traces of trauma in the workshop participants. Using the language of dance improvisation, poetry, gesture and speech, the film aims to humanise the image that host societies generally construct around the label of refugee, bringing forward what we all have in common: our corporeal experiences and the needs for wellbeing, safety, and settlement.



Fig. 1. Cover from *El Cuerpo Partido (The Broken Body)* (Dir. Paula Guzzanti & Martin Devek) 2020.

<https://vimeo.com/469973508> (password: manos) © Paula Guzzanti & Martin Devek.



Fig. 2. Still from *El Cuerpo Partido (The Broken Body)* (Dir. Paula Guzzanti & Martin Devék) 2020.

I situate the methodology of *El Cuerpo Partido* within the context of screendance practices in which the role of the filmmaker overlaps with that of the dance artist/facilitator. In such projects, often the social actors or performers in the film participate in dance workshops. Through the collective experience of dancing, people are taken on a journey that strives for personal and collective growth and transformation. Hence, the conditions for the filming process evolves out of the unique set of circumstances and relations activated in the dance project. Some examples of the dancer/filmmaker model are Amie Dowling's *Separate Sentences* (2016),¹ which explores the politics and representation of mass incarceration, Rosemary Lee's *Liquid Gold is in the Air* (2014),² which is motivated by the goal of fostering a sense of belonging through community dance, and Robbie Synge's film project *Robbie & Julie* (2009-2019),³ in which both dancers investigate solutions for moving together from ground to wheelchair without depending on a hoist. While these works showcase singular aesthetics and artistic motivations, the important ingredient they have in common is kindness as the moving force underpinning their practice of screendance-making. These choreographers place people's participation at the centre of their artistic endeavours.

In the particular context of displaced communities, dance facilitation brings the importance of the body to the centre of political and social action. In this sense, dance functions as a somatic intervention that partakes in a constellation of larger civic efforts for social justice across the world. The dance intervention stands as a form of radical kindness in action, since it aims to transform the invisible within the communal body – the traces of trauma. As dance educator, I recognise that my aim in the *Dance & Wellness for Nicaraguans* project (2019) was to activate conflict transformation from within the realm of the sensorial body, at both individual and collective level. Within this context, I define kindness as an open and compassionate affective intention towards others that opposes that of cruelty, and which operates outside of the motivation of capitalist-driven social dynamics. As such, bringing attention to the corporeality of trauma stands as a 'counter-pedagogy for cruelty'



Fig. 3. Still from *El Cuerpo Partido (The Broken Body)* (Dir. Paula Guzzanti & Martin Devek) 2020.

as defined by anthropologist Rita Segato This is so since it supports a process of re-patterning our sensorial familiarity with practices of cruelty. As Segato points out ‘the repetition of violence results in the normalization of the landscape of cruelty’ (2018). For the participants in the film, I observed this process entailed a breaking through the cycle of violence within themselves, as in acknowledging that they have the right to be safe and claim for their wellness. Then, for the audiences, the film might work as an awakening to new ways of envisioning and activating political action within their reach. I found interesting to note that in bringing together participants and audiences through film creates an international community based upon shared sensibilities. This presents the conditions for a formation of ‘we’ that transcends political constructed forms of identity and survival, and instead developing a sense of kindness through our shared corporeal vulnerability (Buttler, 2004).

Documentary Screendance-Making as a Practice of Kindness

The affective relational nature of dance facilitation was central in the awakening of feelings of kindness between the participants and myself as the leading artist within the filming process. This relationality challenges understandings of kindness as a quality of a single being or a kind of behaviour, since the affective force of kindness reveals itself as intersubjective and always relational.⁴ Kindness presupposes others. Even if this other is ourselves; kindness is projecting its force towards a particular being. My corporeal and emotional involvement in the dance workshops set unique conditions for developing a connection with participants that was based upon trust, sensorial connectivity, and friendship. As a result, my filmmaking relationship with them evolved quite differently from that of the traditional documentary director, which resembles more the approach of the ethnographer. Although it is common practice among filmmakers to immerse themselves in the field, their role tends to stay at a directive talking level, asking people to tell their stories to the camera. This distinction in filming approaches has significant implications for the creative process as well as on the capacity for social

transformation of film-making. Film scholar Bill Nichols explains that “[t]he methods of social science research have remained subordinate to the more prevalent rhetorical practice of moving and persuading an audience and the narrative practice of telling a story” (2017, 244). In contrast, in the dance facilitator / filmmaker model that I want to define, the artist co-creates experiences with their participants, using pedagogies of artistic practice, somatic movement, and community dance. From my experience of filming *El Cuerpo Partido*, I found that the level of human connection built through the dance workshops had a profound influence on the kind of footage that was captured through the camera lens.



Fig. 4. Still from *El Cuerpo Partido (The Broken Body)* (Dir. Paula Guzzanti & Martin Devék) 2020.

Talking about the social role of filmmakers, Raz Yosef and Yaara Ozery suggest that “...documentary testimonies, in addition to being artistic endeavours, perform an important ethical civic role by allowing witnesses to be heard and letting their voices echo in the public sphere” (2016, 272). As dance artist, I acknowledged that the decision of documenting refugees’ testimonies did not emerge from striving to perform such a civic role through my artistic practice. In contrast, what mobilised my acts of civic responsibility was the kindness and friendship that grew from my emotional and sensorial involvement with the participants in the dance workshops. My vision of the social role I could exercise by pursuing the making and subsequent screening of the documentary grew out of my commitment to address the corporeality of trauma as a step towards conflict transformation. I was moved to cultivate bonds with the people I met, and to give something in return to those who trusted and opened their bodies to feeling and exploring their corporeal experiences through my guidance. In this sense, I found that making the film became a gesture of gratitude towards them.



Fig. 5. Still from *El Cuerpo Partido (The Broken Body)* (Dir. Paula Guzzanti & Martin Devék) 2020.

The filming of my conversations with the interviewees was carried out using an improvisatory approach. The proposition involved being responsive to the surrounding environment and events, shooting was done in long takes with no cuts, interviews were not scripted nor rehearsed, and the set was adapted according to the natural light. Like in dance improvisation, the ethos was to treat conversations like real life events, in contrast to the choreographed dance poems which involved multiple takes and interventions in the setting. The filming score that guided the workflow was based on the one central question I wanted the film to address: how do you feel in your body since you left Nicaragua? My director's approach had implications on the quality and content of the stories we could capture. As Nichols explains, "[a]lmost all contemporary filmmakers who rely on interviews meet and talk to their subjects first, often rehearsing what will be said on camera to ensure, at the very least, that it is terse and coherent" (2017, 238). However, what was most important for me was building a sense of trust and empathy with interviewees. To my surprise, this approach created a sense of ease and care that resulted in people sharing intimate, and also painful stories in front of the camera. The presence of the camera turned myself into a witness that honoured their stories.

Although the project did not involve a formal collaboration with participants, I experienced the filming process as a form of co-creation with them, since I allowed their practical and emotional needs to shape and inform my decision-making process. For example, as the people who participated in the workshops were persecuted by the Nicaraguan government, their public appearance would put their families at risk. Thus, it was important not to show their faces in the film. Protecting their identities informed the aesthetic of the work. From that limitation, the image of 'the broken body' emerged as a metaphor of the fragmentation experienced by displaced communities. Nicaraguan refugees had to leave their country, leaving a part of

themselves behind, while the new circumstances push them to seek settlement and security into their host country.

Screendance scholar and artist Douglas Rosenberg suggests that in the construction of screendance “[m]ovements and gestures, released from the physical boundaries of weight, time, and space, are digitally archived to be retrieved and reconstructed at a later date. The dance/dancing thus becomes malleable, fluid, and available as a kind of digital text” (2012, 2). It was this malleability of gathering choreographic material digitally, from multiple registers and qualities, which enabled a process of being more responsive to the unfolding events happening around me during the field research. The footage collates fragments of moments improvised collectively. However, by fusing documentary filmmaking and screendance techniques, the material I gathered during my trip didn’t resemble the level of precision that often characterises dance choreographed for the screen. The documentary slant of the practice meant that the content of the work was always shifting, revealing itself as it evolved. The storyboard took shape as I was filming and meeting new people. My approach to documentary screendance allowed me to connect more to the humaneness of the experience, while still thinking choreographically in terms of the kind of shape and content for the film.

A pressing question I faced when filming participants recollecting their painful stories was to what extent screendance documentary could offer me a methodology and aesthetic dimension for dignifying them? My aim was to avoid representing refugees in the role of victims as is often portrayed in photographs in the media. In this sense, I agree with Marcia Morgan when she suggests that the kind of mute aesthetic representations of the suffering of forced migrants seen in the media propagates feelings “of false pity and superficial benevolence” (2020, 50). For this reason, my strategy was to let people speak their stories by themselves and to place them in conversation with my dance improvisation and poetry writing as a way to generate a dialogue across the three registers. However, as Sara Ahmed suggests, “the labour of pain and language of pain work in determine ways to affect the differences between bodies” (2004, 23); and I strove for the opposite effect. I was interested in mobilizing the viewer’s kinaesthetic and affective sensibility, without eliciting a call for charity. I sought to create a sense of empathy not with the suffering of the other, but with the common in all. Hence, in the editing, the focus was on the matters of the corporeal experiences that emerged in the participants’ stories, as in the need for feeling at home in the place they lived, the importance of good sleep, the right to enjoy their bodies, the collective impact of personal development, and the need for healing. The fact that the film does not include the face of suffering contributes to this ethical-aesthetic goal of questioning how to represent human suffering. What it evolved is a film that is discursive and critical, though still aiming to permeate the expression of vulnerability that comes from having bodies.



Fig. 6. Still from *El Cuerpo Partido (The Broken Body)* (Dir. Paula Guzzanti & Martin Devek) 2020.

Closing Reflections

I discovered in documentary screendance an artistic practice that mobilises through the feelings of kindness in those who participate in the making, including both artists and participants alike. The practice offered me methods and tools for gathering multiple expressive registers, from the more intimate expressions of solo dance improvisation and poetry writing to conversations, and stories with the people I met. In reflecting upon the making of *El Cuerpo Partido*, I developed new understandings of my own practice, which in turn led me to identify the dance facilitator / filmmaker model as an artistic approach that can expand understandings of screendance practice.

Although the current socio-political crisis in Nicaragua is highly political, I made a conscious decision not to address this problem in the film. Since my intention was to bring the body to the forefront of the discussion of force migration, I removed all references to political opinions and party references. In this way, *El Cuerpo Partido* proposes a conversation that shines light over the corporeality of refugee experience, while also proposing a new take on understandings of trauma in the context of forced migration. However, it is difficult for me to judge at this stage whether the film is successful in not objectivising the pain of others. I hope time will afford me the perspective needed to continue to elaborate documentary screendance as a methodology for working with vulnerable communities. As the film and this essay travel and open to the critical feedback of others, I trust that my practice and thinking on documentary screendance-making will mature and lead me to new ways of performing my ethical-social role as an artist in society.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the trust and friendship of the participants who open themselves to the experience of dancing and meditating through her guidance. This project was possible thanks to the kind support of CENDEROS, Edipcia Dubón, Micaela Hierro Dorri, and the financial support of the Higginson Leadership Award administered by Queen's University Belfast. The film was produced thanks to the in-kind time and skills of the students of the University of Costa Rica: Aarón Guerrero Suazo, Camila Naranjo Díaz, and Mar Castro Navarro.

Notes

1. <http://www.amiedowling.com/separate-sentence> accessed 4th November 2020.
2. <https://www.artsadmin.co.uk/project/liquid-gold-is-the-air/> accessed 4th November 2020.
3. <https://www.robbiesynge.com/julieandrobbie> accessed 4th November 2020.
4. Oxford English Dictionary Online, Cambridge Online Dictionary, accessed 24th March 2021.

Works cited

- Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. 2nd. London: Verso.
- Morgan, Marcia. 2020. *Care Ethics and the Refugee Crisis: Emotions, Contestations, and Agency*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Nichols, Bill. 2017. *Introduction to Documentary*. 3er. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Rosenberg, Douglas. 2012. *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Segato, Rita. 2018. *Contra-Pedagogies de La Crueldad*. Buenos Aires: Prometeo.
- Yosef, Raz, and Yaara Ozery. 2016. "Ghostly Testimonies Re-Enactment and Ethical Responsibility in Contemporary Israeli Documentary Cinema." In *Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis*, edited by David J. Elliot, Marissa Silverman, and Wayne D. Bowman, 272–94. New York: Oxford University Press.

PAULA GUZZANTI is a dance artist and resident academic at the University of Malta in the School of Performing Arts, where she lectures in *Practice-as Research, Interdisciplinary Performance-making, Screendance, and Dance Forms and Practices*.

© 2021 Paula Guzzanti



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).