

The cultural memory as creative process, a post-memorial approach to choreography in *A time to mourn* by Iris Karayan

*La memoria cultural como proceso creativo, un enfoque post-memorial de la coreografía en *A time to mourn* de Iris Karayan*

Aline Derderian

Investigadora Independiente

París, Francia

alinem.derderian@yahoo.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-9387-3908

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Abstract

In the book *Haut Karabakh, Le Livre Noir (Nagorno Karabakh, The Black Book)*, published in August 2022, several leading figures of Armenian studies recall the origins of the conflict that has pitted Azerbaijan against Armenia for decades, and give an account of their position as members of the Armenian diaspora. On this occasion the director and actor Simon Abkarian wrote: "A nation deprived of its poetic voice deprives itself of its political one. Both are inseparable".

In the 1920s, modern-day Armenia and Azerbaijan became part of the Soviet Union, with Nagorno-Karabakh, a region predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians but arbitrarily put under Azerbaijani's control by Josef Stalin in 1921. In the late 1980s, as the Soviet Union disintegrated, Nagorno-Karabakh's regional parliament voted to join Armenia, igniting ongoing conflicts that culminated in a genocidal enterprise against the Armenian population of the region. If the poetic and the political are inseparable, this implies that every poetic or artistic work has a political dimension that sometimes extends beyond the very context of its creation or genesis. One explanation for this may be the environment, the context from which it emerged. Another reason may be the sexual identity, ethical, cultural, or social values of the artists, but also those of their audiences. Taking for granted that the understanding of politics in artistic contexts has given rise, throughout the

history of both visual and performing arts, to works that protest, celebrate, present, represent or resist very often through the body, we can envision political stands as either an imperative or as a creative fuel.

Since the beginning of the 20th century in the field of choreography, the notion of constraint or creative task has almost always generated movement (corporeal, metaphorical, or kinesthetic). This paper, therefore, sets out to explore the extent to which the heritage of a culture and the traumas of a threatened nation such as Armenia constitute a creative constraint or a creative starting point that is self-evident or that performing artists impose on themselves. Our argument will be supported by a study of Greek-Armenian choreographer Iris Karayan's piece, *A time to mourn*, choreographed in 2009.

Keywords: choreography, post-memory, diaspora, transmission, movement analysis

Resumen

En el libro Haut Karabakh, Le Livre Noir (Nagorno Karabaj, El Libro Negro), publicado el pasado agosto de 2022, varias figuras destacadas de los estudios armenios recuerdan los orígenes del conflicto que enfrentan desde hace décadas Azerbaiyán y Armenia, y dan cuenta de su posición como miembros de la diáspora armenia. En esta ocasión, el director y actor Simon Abkarian escribió: "Una nación privada de su voz poética se priva a sí misma de su voz política. Ambas son inseparables".

En la década de 1920, las actuales Armenia y Azerbaiyán pasaron a formar parte de la Unión Soviética, con Nagorno Karabaj, una región predominantemente poblada por armenios étnicos pero puesta arbitrariamente bajo control azerbaiyano por Josef Stalin en 1921. A finales de la década de 1980, con la desintegración de la Unión Soviética, el parlamento regional de Nagorno Karabaj votó a favor de unirse a Armenia, lo que desencadenó continuos conflictos que culminaron en una empresa genocida dirigida contra la población armenia de la región. Si lo poético y lo político son inseparables, esto implica que toda obra poética o artística tiene una dimensión política que a veces se extiende más allá del propio contexto de su creación o génesis. Una explicación para ello puede ser el entorno, el contexto del que surgió. Otra razón puede ser la identidad sexual, los valores éticos, culturales o sociales de los artistas, pero también los de su público. Dando por sentado que la comprensión de la política en contextos artísticos ha dado lugar a lo largo de la historia de las artes visuales y escénicas a obras que celebran, presentan, representan o resisten muy a menudo a través del cuerpo, podemos vislumbrar que lo político se erige como un imperativo o como un combustible creativo.

En el campo de la coreografía desde principios del siglo XX, la noción de restricción o de tarea creativa casi siempre ha generado movimiento (corporal, metafórico o cinestésico). Por lo tanto, este artículo se propone explorar hasta qué punto la herencia de una cultura y los traumas de una nación amenazada como Armenia constituyen una restricción creativa o un punto de partida creativo evidente por sí mismo o que los artistas escénicos se imponen a sí mismos. Nuestro argumento se apoyará en un estudio de la pieza de la coreógrafa greco-armenia Iris Karayan, A time to mourn, coreografiada en 2009.

Palabras clave: coreografía, post-memoria, diáspora, transmisión, análisis de movimiento

Iris Karayan is a dancer, choreographer and dance teacher based in Athens. She studied dance at the Greek State School of Dance, and later at Goldsmiths University in London where she obtained a master's degree in performance and culture in 2007. In 2002, she founded the ZITA Dance Company. Her choreographic works have been presented internationally, notably at the prestigious European dance festival Aerowaves, which has invited her on several occasions; for *Mothers* in 2013 and *Unauthorized* in 2020.

Iris Karayan's choreographic practice is based on experimenting with time as a concept. How is time perceived? What does it make us feel? How is it embodied? As a third-generation Armenian living in the diaspora, time for Iris Karayan is a way of implementing recursive strategies that reactivate lived experiences, memories, and traumas as materials for creating movement. To elucidate what is at stake, Marianne Hirsch (2017) refers to these dynamics as "postmemory":

Post-memory, as I define it, describes the relationship that the «next generation» maintains with the personal, collective or cultural transformation or trauma of those who preceded them with events or periods of history that they «remember» only through the stories, images and behaviors they grew up with (p. 44)¹.

In dance, this acknowledgement of the past, which is transcended or concretized by contemporary gestures in perpetual renewal, is characterized by André Lepecki (2016) as "an intrinsic criticality or critical movement" (p. 116).

In April 2021, we organized an international colloquium whose main goal was to bring together and engage a dialogue between visual artists and choreographers for whom Armenian cultural heritage or identity had, at some point, been a decisive parameter in their approach to creating an artistic

¹ Own translation from French.

project or generating movement. It is fair to mention that the sanitary and geopolitical contexts of the time – whether we refer to Covid-19 pandemic or the resumption of war in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)² – had an impact on what was discussed during the event. On this occasion, moderator Ioanna Bili sought to understand how Iris Karayan's choreographic practice draws on her memory and those of her dancers to create eminently contemporary pieces which, rather than addressing the question of cultural heritage head-on, aims instead to make its inscription in bodies visible. We have named 'birthmarks' the fragments of embodied or inherited memories that Marianne Hirsch sifts through epigenetic heredity in order to dismantle the transmission processes of post-memory.

Collecting, superimposing, reactivating, and restructuring audio and visual elements linked to social, historical or dance history events are all elements that the choreographer can use to translate (or transmit) the way she refers to them as a thinking individual and as an artist. Once this research has been carried out, Iris Karayan explores how danced movement becomes both a receptacle and a vector of expression for this material, seen as a starting point for somatic experiences. As she explained during the colloquium, in her view, collaboration with other performers provides an opportunity to develop a new temporality that is specific to the creative project and which draws its sources from a revisited past: "I could conclude by saying that I'm interested in the ways in which memory is stimulated, embodied, performed and experienced"(Karayan, 2021), she said.

We want to investigate this process of recalling the past or historical memory through dance in Iris Karayan's choreography. The work of other practitioners of Armenian origin could have been addressed, as there is no shortage of examples. However, Iris Karayan's repertoire differs radically from our own creations, which has yet to deal with similar themes. It also differs in every aspect from the productions of other artists associated to different fields, in which the notion of 'armenianness' is rather considered as a theme; a theme that would facilitate the portrayal of a history that tends to dwell

² The prolonged conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia triggered an ethnic cleansing campaign in the indigenous Armenian population of Artsakh, initiated by Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, which reached a new level of intensity in 2020. Since 2023, the over 100,000 Armenians from Artsakh who survived have been forced into a state of exodus. This displacement was exacerbated as Azerbaijan, with the backing of the Turkish government, blocked the Lachin Corridor, the sole route connecting the Republic of Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh before attacking the population with the aim of a complete ethnic cleansing. This blockade left the local Armenian population devoid of essential resources and in dire straits. Artsakh is the term utilized by Armenians to name the region.

on the period of 1915, the official year of the Armenian genocide³. These two observations are sufficient to assert that Iris Karayan's choreographic approach is particularly necessary for both the performing and visual arts studies that address issues of inherited, displaced or decentralized cultures. We are, henceforth, willing to interrogate how the implication of a post-memorial constraint in the choreographic approach of Iris Karayan opens the field of artistic possibilities and helps the artist to "overcome" the past in order to choreograph the here-and-now. We borrow this verb from essayist and translator Janine Altounian (2007) whose literary work is essential to Armenian studies.

To the question of whether the artist's Armenian background has influenced her choreographic practice and in which measures, Iris Karayan replies that a subject's physicality is always culturally marked, but that it is constructed and performed according to a past social and cultural environment that necessarily coexists with the present.

In terms of choreographic research and creation, this is a point of particular interest and concern to us. How does contemporary creation in Armenian diasporas take hold of its cultural history? On the other hand, how is this history overtaken by current geopolitical events, forcing practitioners to no longer consider the history of the people as a post-memorial mythology, but rather, as a strategy of protest or even resistance through creation? Iris Karayan (2021) explained that, while these socio-cultural markers are intrinsic to a subject and their way of moving, it is up to the artist to bring them into dialogue with the objectives of the dance.

What I mean is that in my case, the cultural traditions that are somehow layered in my identity are mostly related to my growing up and my family: the traditions and routines related to eating and cooking, narrating, and listening to stories, repeating them and remembering, going to the Armenian church and following the religious traditions, the genocide commemoration day and the annual march to the Turkish embassy etc.

Ultimately, if there is a link between cultural heritage and creation for Iris Karayan, the experience of the present is indeed influenced by traditions and memories that manifest themselves in a way that is specific to each individual, and that she invests in her creative processes in which the "relationship to long time" (Karayan, 2021) is an essential parameter. This apprehension of time can be materialized by the consideration of several

³ The mass extermination of Armenians is considered the first genocide in modern history and, to this day, despite the death of over a million Armenians, the genocide of 1915, which was then initiated by the Young Turk Regime under the Ottoman Empire, is still denied by the Turkish government.

events that precede the construction of the choreographer's identity, the impact they had on the way of life of the people she grew up with, as well as the ways in which these experiences continue to act on her current corporeality.

According to André Lepecki (2016), any transfer of the choreographic piece, literary translation, or plastic work into an "afterlife", which goes beyond the original framework that generated it, offers a new grid for reading this origin and "changes it forever" (p. 115-116)⁴. Since the subject of this study is Iris Karayan's choreographic practice, and that the origin of her work draws on her understanding of the historical, cultural or social events that have marked it, it is interesting to reflect upon the nature of the danced gestures she presents in classical or hybrid scenic spaces. While her dances cannot change the origin of the events that gave rise to a creative process, they do offer a fresh and unique perspective that merges with the present of those who perform them. The dancers, therefore, survive, transcend, and embody the memories to finally produce new corporealities.

We are about to stress our argument about Iris Karayan's piece choreographed in 2009, *A time to mourn*. This women's duet explores the duality between human and animal, as well as the inability to restrain expressions of violence at the heart of a contemporary society that is supposed to be the warrantor of modern civilization. This archetypal violence is transformed into sorrow, power into weakness and the human into animal, wrote Michel Vincenot (2012)⁵.

A time to mourn begins with a tableau in which two dancers dressed in khaki and brown are on all fours. The dark orange lighting design gives the impression of warmth and sunset. One sways her torso from right to left while the other, spatially opposite to her, does the same from front to back. A white diagonal marked on the floor separates them. The gesture is repeated for several minutes. While we cannot see their faces, the dancer's hair flutters as their movements accelerate and degenerate. This has the effect of altering the viewer's focal vision. The only details we can distinguish are the bare parts of their bodies (feet, backs, and arms). Then, a new section begins. The dancers set their movements to the metronomic rhythm of Nikos Veliotis's music. They move to either side of the diagonal marked on the floor, neither looking at each other nor at the audience. Their jumps are always performed as a single block (i.e. the whole body roots on the ground to gather in a curve toward the belly and takes off all at once). The performers straighten up for a while and then change position again. The movement of

⁴ "[...] every translation, every carrying of a work to an afterlife beyond the work's original limit, also reflects back into the original, changing it forever." (Lepecki, 2016, pp. 115-116).

⁵ Own translation from French.

their legs and lower body is direct and economical, as if there always was a definite purpose to this movement of traveling, be it a signal, the expression of a need or an emotion. Meanwhile, their arms and hands scrape the floor, sweeping it on the quest of something to discover. The women occasionally clap their hands and move around. The music alternates between industrial sounds using electronic instruments and a jerky tempo that accelerates to a *crescendo* in the manner of a gasping heartbeat. Although the presence of the two dancers occupying the stage is clear at the outset, the more the choreography progresses, the more they become animated by a dance that does not refer to any identifiable human gesture. Nevertheless, their technical virtuosity and perfect mastery of the rhythm of this complex choreography betray their experience as expert dancers and the underlying work it may have required.

After an approximate length of ten minutes, the dancer on the right slowly approaches the border separating her from her partner and stands opposite her. She waits for a reaction, which soon arrives. The topless dancer on the left –who had been pretending to dig a hole or rake the floor energetically until that moment– leaps over her full length and rolls to stand where her partner was before crossing the white line. The bare-chested dancer stops her task whereas the other crawls from one side of the line to the other. She seems intended to impose her presence in both zones of the stage. This confrontation goes as far as contact, as the topless dancer lying on the floor is immobilized by the other who suddenly climbs above her to block her path. The music continues and the performers disappear from the stage, returning on all fours in the same configuration as when the choreography started. Here they are, on their knees facing each other, once again performing the back-and-forth movement whilst digging in front of them. Although their gaze is still fixed on what they are doing, their position now reveals their bodies camouflaged by a mud-like material. The gesture quickens again, giving the impression that they are trying to pick up the alleged treasure as quickly as possible. The lighting design becomes cold and greenish. The duet stands facing the audience and begins a fast-paced, synchronized dance section. This alternates between three levels (standing, crouching, floorwork). Each passage on the floor is accompanied by some screams that, once again, evoke an animalistic behavior rather than a female voice.

This tableau lasts several minutes and is orchestrated by an intensification of the music's low tone. It sounds like the strings of several violins creaking inharmoniously at different times. The light changes again. It becomes blue and more clinical. At the start of the piece, the warm, poetic orange color accentuated the dancers' animalistic bodily vocabulary. As the cho-

reography progresses, this color gradually disappears, finally showing their skins without artifice, like a neon whose purpose is not to embellish the illuminated subject. This third section focuses on a choreographic lexicon that differs from what has been seen so far. Although certain movements are repeated incessantly, they are transformed with each lighting transition or when a new motion needs to be noticed by the audience. Toward the end of the piece, for instance, the floor routine repeats the general movement of the first two sections, but some breaks during which one of the dancers makes a hand sign 'stop' with her face to the ground have been added. This produces the image of a signal, a need to cease any kind of activity before ending the performance. Furthermore, for the first time in the show, each dancer finally travels with her face uncovered, directing her gaze sometimes in front of her, sometimes to the sky or to her partner.

A fourth section shows a pedestrian's physicality. The latter includes walking, chasing steps, hands placed on the partners' body and, overall, an easily recognizable body language such as hiding one's face with one's hands, miming a rope being pulled to measure a surface or tying a knot. This more ethereal, suspended vocabulary contrasts with the previous twenty minutes without totally breaking up with the atmosphere that has been built up to this point. The animalistic dimension of the beginning has become more organic. This can be identified through different parameters. The first one is the dancers' lower body as it is as anchored to the ground as ever. The second lies in the fact that the dancers are now helping each other carry themselves, clearing paths across the stage and facilitating each other's journey.

The double illusion of the uncritical form of cultural heritage is presented as a false novelty, and as an appearance of historical continuity, while the temporal form of history emerges as that of a rupture in the movement of historical continuity, admitting instead a form of transformation and movement that is understood through « ruptures »⁶ (Lüderitz, 2018, p. 169).

We can then think of Iris Karayan's choreographic piece as a rupture in the course of history in order to study the bodily effects of one of its fragments, memorized by the artist and linked to her cultural heritage. In addition, the title *A time to mourn*, is so strong and eloquent that it is hard to ignore it

⁶ Own translation from French: [La double illusion de la forme non critique de l'héritage culturel est présentée comme une fausse nouveauté, et comme une apparence d'une continuité historique, alors que la forme temporelle de l'histoire émerge comme celle d'une rupture du mouvement de la continuité historique, et admettant à la place une forme de transformation et de mouvement qui se comprend à travers des « ruptures ».]

when deducing an analysis of a choreographic work through the lens of the dialectic image. As Iris Karayan explained to Ioanna Bili during the colloquium in 2021, the past and the memories are tools held by bodies which, by choreographically interrogating them, modify and generate a gestural form that can be read in parallel with the original historical temporality. This is precisely the phenomenon observed in this example, where the initial animal kinetics are not identical to those found after thirty minutes of performance.

From this point on, the performers deliberately break away from the images they themselves embody in space. This has two consequences. The first is spectatorial. It allows the starting point of the movement to be constantly put back into play, so as to better understand the choreography as a whole from its origins. The second carries a cultural value. It shows a desire to use the memory of the historical narrative on a personal scale, perhaps in an attempt to investigate how it affects current movements. In other words, this moment in the piece explores how the ancestral can be bodily and artistically explored by using contemporary dance technique. In doing so, *A time to mourn* illustrates what a post-memorial approach to choreography can give us to see and experience. The dehumanizing violence alluded to in Iris Karayan's story –which could be related to Armenian genocide or some other events she carefully chooses not to reveal– may well be linked to memories that have resurfaced (e.g. family rituals of marches in support of the Armenian cause, or stories heard in the course of her identity construction). The fact is that the final choreography does not seek to re-transcribe them in a commemorative way. Rather, it experiments with creative, performative and scenic tools (such as the use of light or the camouflaged costumes for example), to physically resurrect an inherited traumatic experience and correlate it with the present.

If we replace the example of the dream chosen by Walter Benjamin with dance (Lüderitz, 2018), Iris Karayan's choreographic vocabulary in *A time to mourn* becomes comprehensible to the audience when it is traversed by changes in movement quality highlighted by a specific scenography. Each transition from one tableau to another, functions as a moment of irruption in the dance just seen and is suddenly put into perspective for the next. In conclusion, all the sections that make the choreography combine different subjectivities (those of the two dancers and the choreographer) in relation to an initial theme that reveals itself to us as spectators, and perhaps even to the artists, as their gestures sketch out "the constellation".

[...] it is through the re-actualization of anguish on an individual level that this awareness or taking possession of one's psychic distress leads to a process of subjectivation in the heir or heiress, enabling him or her to question others about the murderous history that brought him or her to them (Altounian, 2007, p. 69).

To conclude, we argue that through the artistic constraints we have described, Iris Karayan has been able to go beyond the trauma, the historical, cultural, or societal issues at the outset, to choreographically render an account of the symptoms or effects of the clandestine inheritance in the psychic lives of the heirs that Janine Altounian refers to. For the author, it is necessary to confront her 'Armenianness' in a subjective way in order to be able to acknowledge and perhaps alleviate the collective trauma that imbues it (2007, p.68).

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