

THE CHOREOGRAPHIC HORIZONS OF ISABEL ROCAMORA: “INCALCULABLE” EXILES

ANNALISA PICCIRILLO

In the workshop “Exile Writing”, we explored the question of exile in its multiple technologies. Here, I would like to present a technology of writing that specifically relates to the body: contemporary choreography. The example of the video-dance *Horizon of Exile* (2007) by I. Rocamora will help me to discuss how ‘dance’, ‘exile’, ‘writing’ and ‘femininity’ intertwine in creating the alternative “horizons” provided by the video digital support.

Writing/Choreography

I would like to introduce, with a lapidary definition, what I mean by ‘choreography’. I will quote a statement by the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida, in his *Writing and Difference* (1978):

And thus we say “writing” for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, *choreography* of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural “writing”. ... All this to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected with these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves. [1]

Beyond its ‘differences’ – historical traditions, multiple styles and incalculable expressions – ‘choreography’ can be defined as a system of signs always ‘differed’ and ‘dislocated’ in time and space. It is an embodied language that reveals a *technè*, a technology, a shared knowledge of gestures, and a system of memory apt to remember. Its privileged instrument is the body, what writes and expresses its own textuality, with all its “incalculable” differences and all its “incalculable” choreographies.

INCALCULABLE CHOREOGRAPHIES

“Incalculable choreographies”: I borrow the expression from the interview conducted by Christie McDonald to Jacques Derrida, where the philosopher is invited to talk on sexual difference, and on the “place” of the feminine in contemporary social-cultural representation. Beyond any binary opposition, beyond the masculine/feminine that governs the decorum of codes, Derrida dreams of – and believes in – the “multiplicity of sexually marked voices ... mobile and non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each ‘individual’ ...”. In his conclusion, he remarks:

Then too, I ask you, what kind of a dance would there be, or would there be one at all, if the sexes were not exchanged according to rhythms that vary considerably? In a quite rigorous sense, the *exchange* alone could not suffice either, however, because the desire to escape the combinatory itself, to invent incalculable choreographies, would remain. [2]

Fascinated by Derrida’s expression, I will use it as a deconstructionist ‘trope’, in order to disseminate the meanings of the dancing event; in order to investigate the interaction of multiple bodies in a live dance

performance or in a video-dance work; it will possibly allow me to observe its encounter with the 'other' and its alterity.

FEMININE WRITING

One of my aims is to investigate how 'dance', 'writing' and 'femininity' intertwine; along this focus, it is Hélène Cixous who provides me with theoretical and methodological tools. The French feminist invites us to explore the sources of otherness in the female body, by stating the 'hospitality' of writing as a privileged space for manifesting women's agency and physicality. In *The Newly Born Woman* (1986) and in "Coming to Writing" (1991), Cixous brings the matter of physicality into writing: "When I say "writing" seized me, it wasn't a sentence that had managed to seduce me, there was absolutely nothing written, not a letter, not a line. But in the depths of the flesh, the attack. Pushed. Not penetrated. Invested. Set in motion." [3] Cixous' insistence on the physicality of the writing body seems to imply a direct relationship between the female body and "feminine writing". The work by Isabel Rocamora is an example of such "feminine writing" – where exiled women find hospitality by means of the technology of video-dance. Her choreographic writing hosts exiled voices and bodies; her is the space where women can share, elaborate and, possibly, overcome experiences of displacement and, finally, acquire an identity 'in suspension'.

Isabel Rocamora: *Horizon of Exile*

Isabel Rocamora (1968) was born and brought up in Barcelona by an English father and a Spanish mother. She has been based in the U. K since 1986, and she now is working between London and Barcelona. Graduating in Performance and Cinema Studies from Bristol University, her practice has developed throughout performance, live mixed media and artistic cinema, centered on a rigorous investigation on the performative language of human gesture in its relationship to individual and cultural identity. [4] A technique of aerial movements distinguishes Rocamora's dance – better known as "anti-gravity choreography". The author says: "It uses the hanging body and its 'subversion' of gravity as a metaphor for changing states of consciousness, paralleling the experience of weightlessness with freedom from the rational. Distinct from zero/micro gravity (as experienced in parabolic flights), anti-gravity performance needs the force of gravity to move against." [5] In Rocamora's work, slowness, stillness and anti-gravity forge the movement of the dancing bodies to re-elaborate and negotiate dance's ontological essence: it is movement itself:

As an anti-gravity artist I have spent the last ten years experimenting to push the boundaries of what the body in suspension is able to do. During these investigations one opens up areas of the body that were previously tightly held. At the point of opening one may feel the release of an experience, a memory, an emotion that had been housed in that area for years. [6]

Horizon of Exile, a 2007 video-dance work, follows the exile journey of two veiled women across timeless deserted landscapes. The testimonies of Kurdish and Iraqi women, living today in London, inform the unfolding of the narrative; alongside are the stories of two older women, themselves exiled, and local to the landscapes of the Atacama desert, in Chile – where the film is actually shot. The chorus of these voices carries, on the one hand, strong memories of the female circumcision, erasure and escape, and on the other hand, it provides the images of a distant childhood home. The female body writing intertwines with the live memories: the live experiences of exiled identities forced to leave their countries

in order to protect a sense of themselves. *Horizon...* talks of a double exile: in one of the video sequences, a spectral female voiceover insists: “Our existence is wrong, being a woman is wrong, it’s like that”. Some of the voices were recorded in England, as if to reveal a second exile, the one that joins with the ‘internal’ exile that being a woman signifies.

Rocamora’s Voice

Positioning itself between the cinematic, the real world and performativity, Rocamora’s work sits between fiction, representation and the metaphor – this creative overlapping mirrors her own personal experience:

These resonant narratives awake a personal desire to treat complex feelings surrounding my own story of exile and self-finding at the age of eighteen (Spain – U.K). While reflecting female Middle Eastern experience of exile and drawing an understanding from my own autobiographical material, *Horizon* is foremost an installation about woman and identity.

Faced with issues of first person representation (Middle Eastern woman from a Western perspective) and wishing to present an essence rather than a given cultural context, I have chosen to construct a fictive character and environment which are drawn from various common denominators: Palestine (lead performer), Central Iraq/ Kurdistan/ Iran (interviewees), Jordan (nomadic desert culture), trans-national Bedouin/ Iran/ Jordan (costumes), Saudi Arabia (call to prayer) and Armenia (music). [7]

In occasion of an informal conversation, the artist told me of the inner drive that pushes her to give voice and movement to exiled/veiled women. She was educated in a private school by nuns; thus, in her childhood, she had a familiar and accustomed understanding of female veiled bodies. After the London bomb terroristic attacks in 2005, an uncanny change took place: Rocamora’s perception of the ‘veiled body’ transformed – no matter what race, religion or ethnic group, she began to perceive those ‘veiled’ bodies as unfamiliar, as if her gaze was beginning to interiorize the fears and stereotypes intersected to the veil. The veil’s issue is complex and impossible to discuss here; still, I find interesting to see how and why Rocamora decides to challenge and re-elaborate the image of veiled bodies’. In her coreography, she offers us her re-vision, her “horizon”, of veiled identities.

I will extract three sequences, three “incalculable movements”, from Rocamora’s work, in order to show the exact places where, in my reading, the essence of exile writing/choreography comes to be realized; the exact loci where the female quest for agency becomes visible.

THE SECRET BEHIND THE VEIL

In the first sequence, the dancer looks into the camera – it is the moment when she meets our ‘other’ and privileged gaze. In this situation, the confrontation with ‘the other’, allowing for self-recognition, remains ‘suspended’ through the use of the veil itself. Slowly, the dancer covers her face – she performs the act of hiding. We cannot see; our western gaze cannot understand what lies behind the veil, incapable of grasping the weight of private sorrows, the pains and the losses carried by the woman’s timeless and ‘incalculable’ journey into exile. There is there a secret: what lies behind the veil is ‘incalculable’.

'COUNTER-DANCE'

The second sequence is when two dancing bodies, sitting and falling in a vast scape, betray a 'serene' violence. A flux of primitive energy seems to drive the scene. The choreography is developed through gestures of resistance and subversion. A "counter-dance" is displayed: the women seem to fight with/for their bodies, in order to release a natural instinct, to liberate a prohibited sexual instinct. At this stage, Cixous' call "to write" would resound; her writing becoming the flesh of the two dancer's bodies in subversion:

Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.... To write. it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, ...; it will tear her away from the structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot"; for not being both at once; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing. [8]

BODIES/IDENTITIES 'IN SUSPENSION'

The third choreographical movement is visible at different stages of the work as if to reveal the signs of Rocamora's writing. Exile writing is embodied in the 'anti-gravity choreography' manifested in the rolling bodies of the protagonists. The anti-gravity body moves through space, travelling as if it encountered no resistance: "as if the matter of the body itself was no different from the air that is moving in, as if it were rising and descending at one and the same time." [9] In the apparently 'silent' space of the desert, Cixous's writing would resonate once again, seeming to choreograph, comment and be carried along by the dancers' movements:

She doesn't "speak", she throw her trembling body into the air, she let's herself go, she flies, she goes completely into her voice, she vitally defends the "logic" of her discourse with her body; her flesh speaks true...she conveys meaning with her body. [10]

In *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* – original title: *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1980) – the Algerian writer Assia Djébar asks us not to forget that "even those bodies who have been incarcerated, no matter what their age, class, or race, may have imprisoned bodies, but have souls that move more freely than even before." [11] In the ending of *Horizon*, the veiled body is near the bank of a river or the shore of a sea; here, the woman encounters water, slowly starting to "unveil" herself. It is the water to choreograph her body; liquidity becomes the matter, the matrix, and the material of her subversive writing – the space of her survival and of her expression. The act of self-affirmation in water depicts her agency, the movement of her choice – "freely than even before", as Djébar would say. In the kinetic dynamism of anti-gravity, and in the poetical suspension of the body, her female identity is able to find a new place, a new home, a new "horizon", and a new hospitality...

I would like to conclude my comment to this singular example of "exile writing" with the concept of "hospitality". Rocamora chooses multiple places in order to choreograph exile: as a language and as a technique, dance itself makes its journey towards other technologies and other languages; it is choreography itself to 'exile' towards the video technology.

An act of hospitality can only be poetic

(J. Derrida)

The hosting of dance on the screen provokes specific reflexions. Video-dance differs from a typical live performance because of the multiple features interacting on the digital support. In the first instance, the dancing body is perceived as hyper-visible in being re-presented and re-visible in the time and space “a-venir”/“still to come”. With its gestures, the body seems to acquire a ‘spectral’ dimension – since its performative act experiences the temporal disjunction in a given moment that does not belong to time any longer; it actually returns when we “recall” it in a specific time and space. It is how digitality challenges the so – called ‘ephemeral’ value of live dance performances – the dancing gesture does not disappear once it is done, but it ‘lives on’ differently inside the ‘spectral’ dimension of the digital screen. [12]

Here the discussion could be very productive if we think of digital dance; if, for instance, we might consider here the “motion capture” technology so widely used in contemporary dance. Still, this would take us along a complex path; what we can rather say is that, on the other side of technology, still as its own countersignature, the histories of female displacement find a fruitful hospitality in natural spaces. In *Horizon...* two women leave the urban space, a ‘still’ space, the space of law and convention where the masculine power penetrates all intimacy from the minaret; they move to the Atacama desert, which, in its landscapes made of ice, vapour and sand, materializes the projection of the two women’s interior spaces. The desert and, in the end, water signify an undefined place, possibly arid and vacuous, possibly devoid of points of reference; nevertheless, it is open enough to be crafted by the act of theatre, fertile enough to host the act of female agency. Water is the last horizon; in its impossible frame because too fluid, the dancer restages the wonderful *Ophelia* by John Everett Millais (1852); like the Shakespearean figure, the woman-dancer, ‘suspended’ there, can affirm her freedom. In this work, nature really hosts female writing – the desert and water absorb the bodies, the traces, the memories – the “incalculable choreographies” of their exile.

“INCALCULABLE” EXILES

There is still one last consideration to make: the journey of Rocamora’s exiled bodies reminds us of the dance of contemporary ‘real’ exiles, which might be part of the ‘choreography’ of the not-yet-elaborated trauma experienced nowadays by the European collective memory – specifically, by the Italian memory. The Southern coast in Sicily are witnessing the infinite migrating flows of people, carried by innumerable boats, who arrive from Northern Africa to Italy through the Mediterranean Sea. In these ‘incalculable’ transits, the image of the female body is often absent, even more ‘suspended’, because of her in/visibility. In this time of ‘historical myopia’, we should start interrogating the ‘veil’ covering our own western gazes (predicated on their certainty and belief in absolute knowledge): it might be the necessary way to have an insight into our historical and political contemporary ‘choreography’.

Hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic amongst others. Insofar as it has to do with the ethos, that is, the residence, one’s at-home, the familiar place of dwelling, as much as the manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, ethics is hospitality; ethics is entirely coextensive with the experience of hospitality, whichever way one expands or limits that. [13]

References and Notes:

1. J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 9.
2. J. Derrida and Christie McDonald, "Choreographies," in *Diacritics* 12, no. 2 (1982): 154.
3. H. Cixous, "Coming to Writing" and Other Essays, ed. Deborah Jensen (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 9.
4. Isabel Rocamora's Web Site, www.isabelrocamora.org (accessed June 6, 2012).
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. H. Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa," in *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (1975): 8.
9. Isabel Rocamora's Web Site, www.isabelrocamora.org (accessed June 6, 2012).
10. H. Cixous and C. Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 92.
11. A. Djébar, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1992).
12. J. Derrida and B. Stiegler, *Echographies of Television* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).
13. J. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001), 16-17.