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The Hidden Dictatorship: A Policy of Control over Freedom of Expression — The Case of Dance Censorship in Lebanon

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Abstract

This article examines dance censorship in Lebanon as a mechanism of ideological control operating beneath the appearance of legal regulation and societal protection. While Lebanon is frequently portrayed as a space of relative freedom of expression within the region, the performing arts — and dance in particular — remain subject to institutional and social forms of censorship that shape not only artistic production but also the collective perception of art itself. Drawing on theories of power (Foucault), cultural capital (Bourdieu), and social representations (Moscovici), this study analyzes how censorship intervenes in the processes of objectification and anchoring through which the public constructs meaning around choreographic works.

The research argues that censorship does more than limit artistic freedom: it restructures the cultural framework within which future generations interpret art, normalizing restricted forms of expression and gradually reducing the horizon of the thinkable. Through legal mechanisms, bureaucratic procedures, and social pressure groups, the Lebanese system produces a "regulated visibility" of dance, allowing only representations aligned with dominant moral, religious, and political norms. Case studies — including state interventions, festival cancellations, and socially driven repression of artists such as Alexandre Paulikevitch and Hanane Hajj Ali — illustrate how this control extends beyond institutions into the social sphere.

Ultimately, the article proposes that Lebanese dance censorship operates as a form of hidden dictatorship, one that maintains the illusion of tolerance while exercising preventive control over imagination, memory, and cultural narratives. By altering the social representation of dance across generations, censorship becomes a tool of long-term political influence. The study concludes by emphasizing artistic resistance as a counter-power and calling for urgent reconsideration of censorship mechanisms in order to preserve cultural plurality and democratic expression.

This maxim is frequently invoked to justify censorship. Yet freedom of expression is a fundamental right granted to every individual to express ideas, and this right includes artistic freedom of expression. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees "the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations, 1948, art. 19). Artistic freedom is fully embedded within this framework, since through the creation of works, artists participate in the circulation of ideas and opinions — an essential element for the proper functioning of a democratic society (Nussbaum, 2010).

Censoring artistic creation, however, does not merely deprive individuals of access to the arts and artistic works; it also restricts public debate and weakens citizens' critical capacity (UNESCO, 2021). By imposing limits on artistic expression, the diversity of perspectives is undermined, and the evolution of societies is hindered, given that art plays a fundamental role as a mirror, a site of questioning, and a space of contestation (Foucault, 1971). Art challenges, unsettles established norms, and opens pathways for essential reflections on the world that surrounds us.

Moreover, controlling what may be said or represented about an "object" over an extended period profoundly shapes the way a community perceives it (Bourdieu, 1982). Such regulation produces a bias in the construction of social representations, influencing how a society interprets an artistic event. This manipulation of collective memory and imaginaries thus contributes to the establishment of an official truth, often dictated by political, ideological, or cultural

interests, at the expense of pluralism in perspectives (Didi-Huberman, 2019).

Yet despite its recognized importance, artistic freedom is increasingly under threat. Forms of censorship and restrictions imposed on works and artists continue to proliferate, whether originating from states, social groups, or economic actors. These limitations — often justified on moral, political, or religious grounds — are not without consequences: they shape artistic production, structure cultural narratives, and restrict the diversity of expression.

A fundamental question therefore arises: does censorship constitute a form of dictatorship concealed beneath legal and societal pretexts? Under the guise of preserving public order, traditional values, or political stability, is there not in fact an attempt to impose ideological control that limits artists' capacity to question the world and manipulates the public's perception of art? To illustrate this issue, let us consider the case of dance in Lebanon — an art form particularly exposed to tensions between individual expression, social norms, and institutional control. In this context, the impact of censorship, though often justified through legal arguments, undermines artistic freedom and the country's cultural diversity.

Lebanon, frequently portrayed as a democratic and liberal republic, conceals within its practices a significant obstruction to artistic and expressive freedom. Artistic creation and production — particularly in the performing arts — are subject to restrictions imposed by three principal sources: censorship authorities, religious institutions such as Dar al-Fatwa, the Catholic Information Center, or Dar al-Tayfa al-Druze, and the public itself.

State censorship, however, runs counter to Lebanon's constitutional commitments. Paragraph B of the Lebanese Constitution stipulates that Lebanon, as a founding and active member of the United Nations, is bound by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Lebanese Republic, 1990; United Nations, 1948). By restricting artists' freedom of expression and limiting the public's right to freely access artistic works and information, authorities contradict these fundamental principles. By confining access to artistic creation in this way, such policies do not merely hinder the freedom of creators; they also shape a distorted perception of art within society. Gradually, censorship

contributes to the construction of a truncated social representation of art, where artistic expression is filtered, sanitized, and subjected to dominant ideological and cultural norms.

Among the arts, dance in Lebanon has followed a particularly arduous trajectory. Within a patriarchal, multicommunal, and multiconfessional society, dance has long been viewed with suspicion. With the exception of masculine dabké[1] — generally well accepted — dance has historically been recognized neither as a legitimate male art form nor as a socially legitimate female one. Female dancers in particular were marginalized and relegated to the fringes of society (Chaaya, 2014). According to Dariane (2022), dance in Lebanon remains burdened by numerous stereotypes that obstruct its democratization; the stigmatization of dancers provides a striking example of a negative perception deeply embedded in Lebanese society. In such a context, it is unsurprising that dance continues to suffer from an unfavorable public image.

Beyond negative social representations, other factors — notably censorship — further exacerbate the situation. Rather than promoting the democratization of dance and making it accessible to all, these restrictions narrow the circle of its practitioners, thereby limiting its cultural reach and its role in artistic and social development.

Historically, dance existed in Lebanon well before the 1940s[2], primarily in its traditional form, deeply rooted in popular heritage. From the 1950s onward, however, other forms of dance began to emerge without supplanting dabké. As Sonia Fakhri-Frem (2003) notes, the decades between 1950 and 1970 in Lebanon were marked by unprecedented artistic dynamism; political, social, and economic conditions were conducive to the emergence of a new choreographic scene alongside theatre, poetry, music, and cinema. Within this dynamic environment, artists were drawn into a period of creative effervescence, exploring innovative choreographic languages inspired both by Western influences and by

[1] **Dabké** is Lebanon's traditional dance; it is a line dance in which dancers, shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand, strike the ground with their feet in a steady rhythm.

[2] The year 1943 marks a turning point in Lebanon's history, with the country's accession to independence.

local cultural specificities. The Caracalla Dance Theater, for example, was founded in 1970 under highly favorable auspices. Yet this creative momentum coincided with the establishment of a state control system aimed at monitoring artistic works and limiting their scope.

Under the pretext of protecting the public — or more broadly, of safeguarding the State itself — censorship presents itself as a regulatory mechanism governing theme deemed sensitive, such as representations of the body, religion, identity, public space, belonging, patriotism, war, and collective memory. The country's recent history bears witness to several choreographic works that have been censored or "framed." Admittedly, dance remains the least targeted sector, as it occupies a more limited position within the performing arts; nevertheless, it is not exempt from forms of suffocation. Various factors may thus lead to the interruption of a performance, the suppression of certain sections, or even the radical alteration of entire scenes.

Indeed, in a political context shaped by the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), censorship of the performing arts was institutionalized in 1977 through Legislative Decree No. 2 of Lebanese Law No. 76, which imposed systematic monitoring of stage productions. This mechanism places artists under the direct authority of the General Security, which holds absolute discretionary power over the approval, modification, or total prohibition of performances. The absence of clear and transparent criteria in the evaluation of artistic works reinforces a climate of uncertainty for creators, who are compelled to self-censor in order to avoid severe sanctions. These include the closure of performance venues for periods of up to one year, prison sentences for cultural organizers that may reach three years, and substantial fines (Heinrich Böll Stiftung Middle East, 2010).

This censorship relies on vague and arbitrary justifications, invoking broad notions such as "threats to civil peace," "violations of public morality," or "offenses to religion." Beneath this rhetoric lies an effort to neutralize any critique of the political system and of the power figures emerging from the civil war — actors who, despite having transformed the country into a battlefield for years, continue to exercise unquestioned control over state institutions (Corm, 2003).

A revealing example of this dynamic occurred in 2013 during the

Baalbek International Festival — a major artistic event of international renown. That year, a dance segment set to a Christian religious chant was vehemently denounced by the Gathering of Muslim Scholars in Lebanon, leading to the prohibition of the scene in subsequent performances. In an official statement, the Gathering declared that Lebanon had not witnessed a "similar offense" in years and condemned what it described as "organized efforts at the international level to undermine the religious convictions of some, in the name of art and creativity." The scholars called upon all believers to react to such offenses and expressed solidarity with the Church in condemning the performance. They further urged the President of the Republic to instruct the competent authorities — primarily the General Security — to put an end to these "organized offenses," in the name of preserving a "responsible freedom" (LBCI, 2013).

Censorship also targets works addressing war, questioning political leaders or their parties, normalizing relations with Israel, or engaging with themes perceived as immoral (nudity, homosexuality, and similar subjects). Even within an artistic context, the mere exposure of the body or the transgression of certain norms may be deemed unacceptable, leading to the cancellation, modification, or closure of performances. This occurred in 2018, when a nightclub in Beirut was shut down by the authorities following a performance considered "more than daring," which included nudity in a public space dedicated to dance. The event was judged to be contrary to public decency (OLJ, 2018).

Moreover, censorship in Lebanon does not always take the form of explicit prohibition; it often operates through heavy and opaque administrative and bureaucratic procedures. Any public performance, including dance, must obtain prior authorization from the General Security, which operates under the Ministry of Interior. For dance companies, both local and international, this requirement creates a situation of permanent dependency:-

1- Application files must include the program of the performance, presentation texts, and sometimes even video recordings or detailed synopses.

2- Processing times are unpredictable and may extend until the final days preceding the performance.

3- In certain cases, no clear justification is provided when a performance is refused.

This bureaucratic control thus amounts to a form of silent censorship: the State can block or delay a work simply by failing to grant authorization in time. As a result, performances scheduled within festivals have already faced last-minute threats of cancellation, not because of explicit content, but due to the absence of timely approval. For organizers, this uncertainty undermines programming, compromises the festival's international visibility, and generates constant pressure on artists, who may feel compelled to adjust their content in order to avoid administrative obstruction. In practice, this administrative censorship functions as a preventive filter: it requires no explicit ideological justification, yet it exerts considerable power over the circulation of choreographic works in Lebanon.

Moreover, Michel Foucault, in Discipline and Punish, reminds us that power does not reside solely within official structures, but in the processes of surveillance and regulation that permeate everyday practices (Foucault, 1975). Applied to the censorship of choreographic works in Lebanon, this insight is particularly relevant: artists are not only evaluated by external committees but are also shaped by the constant awareness of the surveilling gaze of both the State and society.

Pierre Bourdieu, in Distinction, argues that cultural capital — encompassing knowledge, tastes, and artistic practices — functions as a mechanism of social distinction and power (Bourdieu, 1979). In the Lebanese context of censorship, works considered politically correct or socially acceptable benefit from a form of cultural capital that allows them to pass more easily through the mesh of censorship mechanisms.

Faced with these restrictions, artists and advocates for freedom have multiplied acts of resistance. As early as 2016, an international mobilization supported by the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM) sought to challenge the legitimacy of censorship and to demand safeguards for creative freedom (Donizeau & Khajehi, 2024). This initiative revealed a fundamental dysfunction: decisions by the General Security derive from a police authority lacking artistic or cultural expertise and are based on shifting criteria dictated by the prevailing geopolitical context. The

Observatory of Censorship (Marsad al-Raqaba), a collective bringing together artists, lawyers, and cultural actors, subsequently submitted a draft law aimed at establishing a clear legal framework guaranteeing freedom of expression in the artistic domain.

Despite these initiatives, resistance from the authorities remains inflexible. The ruling power, still dominated by former belligerents of the civil war, perceives art as a threat whenever it questions collective memory or challenges established confessional and political dynamics. In this sense, censorship becomes an instrument of control not only over cultural space, but also over historical narration and the country's collective identity. This systematic silencing of artistic speech thus illustrates one of the most striking paradoxes of contemporary Lebanon: a country that presents itself as a crossroads of culture and modernity, yet silences those who seek to interrogate its past and present. Far from being a simple measure aimed at preserving public order or societal values, this censorship resembles a genuine confiscation of the right to expression, whereby the State and its institutions reserve for themselves the monopoly of official discourse.

Is this not the very sign of an insidious dictatorship, concealed beneath the guise of a "permit to perform," which compels artists to present works mutilated by censorship committees? By limiting the scope of the artistic message, this mechanism does not merely dilute cultural productions; it shapes and conditions the way society perceives choreographic works, even altering their image across generations. The issue at stake is therefore no longer solely that of artistic freedom, but rather of large-scale ideological control, where repression operates under the cover of legality and the purported respect of public sensitivities. Indeed, in all authoritarian regimes, granting a pseudo–freedom of expression in any domain serves only to maintain the illusion of tolerance. Within this logic, by authorizing certain carefully supervised performances, the censorship committee projects the image of cultural openness and progressiveness, while exercising strict control over the entire artistic and media landscape. This strategy thus conceals the omnipresence of censorship and the systematic repression of genuine dissent (Daucé, 2013).

In the Lebanese context, this dynamic is clearly manifested in the management of artistic censorship. While Lebanon is often perceived as

a bastion of freedom of expression in the region, it adopts a mechanism similar to that of authoritarian regimes: it permits certain forms of artistic expression under strict conditions, thereby creating an illusion of freedom while maintaining control over the content disseminated. By authorizing selected performances, the censorship committee contributes to this maneuver by projecting an appearance of cultural openness, yet it merely channels works that conform to established norms. Works that dare to address sensitive themes or challenge dominant narratives — whether political criticism, marginalized identities, or social issues — are systematically censored.

These restrictions do not concern only local productions; international works are also affected. In 1999, for example, Maurice Béjart and his Béjart Ballet Lausanne faced interference from Lebanese censorship authorities. During a performance featuring a tableau in which male dancers appeared bare-chested while women dressed as vestals surrounded men in prayer, the scene was deemed disrespectful. The General Security required the performers to cover themselves, and Béjart ultimately chose to remove the censored segment (Cath.ch, 1999).

In 2009, a Brazilian samba troupe touring Lebanon saw its performance canceled in the city of Tyre after Muslim religious dignitaries described the show as "pornographic" and contrary to Islamic values. Even the adoption of less provocative costumes proposed by the Brazilian embassy failed to quell local opposition (Observers, 2009).

This overview of dance censorship in Lebanon paves the way for a deeper analysis of the process through which representations of dance are shaped within the Lebanese public, generation after generation. Indeed, since each individual carries values, norms, ideologies, lived experiences, and a personal history, social representations can be defined as "systems of opinions, knowledge, and beliefs" (Abric, 1994) that are formed within a given social group in interaction with an "object" — in this case, dance.

Ordinarily, the State establishes a cultural policy aimed at democratizing access to the arts — including dance — and making them accessible to all audiences, notably by integrating them into educational pathways (Nussbaum, 2010). Early exposure, particularly within the school context, allows individuals to become familiar with the art of dance

and to appropriate it as a form of knowledge and perceptual representation, especially since cognitive frames of reference are still in formation at a young age. Through this process, dance becomes not only a cultural object but also an integral component of the individual's biographical construction, contributing to the development of their social representation of art.

However, censorship, through its control over artistic content and the themes addressed in performance, influences the way the social representation of dance is constructed. As Danto suggests, the representational dimension develops through direct engagement with the work itself (Leenhardt, 1994). When the work encountered is censored, this representational dimension is reduced to a pseudo-image.

Serge Moscovici describes the process by which the image of dance — or its social representation — is formed in two stages: objectification and anchoring. According to Moscovici, objectification consists of "discovering the iconic quality of an idea or a work in order to reproduce it as an image" (Moscovici, 1984). This transformation renders ideas acceptable and comprehensible. Objectification thus enables individuals to appropriate and integrate knowledge about dance according to the "cultural criteria" of their social group and the "normative criteria" that define their value system (Moliner, 2015).

Anchoring, by contrast, assembles the representation and associates it with a familiar image, thereby facilitating the integration of new elements of knowledge into categories already present within the individual's value system (Palmonari & Doise, 1986). This process plays a crucial role by granting representation communicative value, enabling individuals to connect their personal experience with the surrounding reality.

Anchoring involves several dimensions. First, meaning: the moment when the represented object acquires a specific significance for both the individual and the social group to which they belong (Moscovici, 1984). This stage reflects the individual's social insertion, determining how the object — here, dance — is perceived and interpreted within the group. Second, utility: elements of the representation do not merely express existing social relations; they also participate in the creation of new relations through dynamic and dialectical exchange. Finally, rootedness: the moment when the representation finds its

place within a broader system of thought, becoming an integrated and stable element of the individual's cognitive process (Doise, 1991).

The processes of objectification and anchoring can be profoundly altered by censorship, particularly in the domain of dance. By suppressing part or all of a work, censorship directly impacts public acceptance of certain ideas, especially those that diverge from established norms. When censorship prevents the dissemination of new forms of dance or critical themes, it hinders the integration of these ideas into common cultural practices. The anchoring of social or political concepts (such as freedom of expression or equal rights) is thus compromised, as these ideas are prevented from circulating freely within the public sphere.

Thus, by imposing restrictions on a work, the State alters the criteria necessary for the construction of the social representation of dance. The effect of such censorship does not amount to a mere aesthetic adjustment; it disrupts the way the public perceives and integrates dance, and may even produce a distorted image of choreographic art. This manipulation of the process of social representation, orchestrated through state control, restricts individuals' capacity to develop an authentic and comprehensive appreciation of this art form (Derrida, 2001). Far from promoting the democratization of dance, censorship fragments and deforms the ways in which this art is understood and integrated within Lebanese society.

Nevertheless, the construction of a social representation of dance is not reducible to the simple accumulation of information; it involves cognitive mechanisms through which individuals assign coherent meaning to their social environment. In this regard, Heider proposes a fundamental process whereby individuals attribute a positive or negative valence to an object or work, in order to develop a coherent and stable view of their social world (Beauvois & Deschamps, 1990). This attribution of valence plays a crucial role in how individuals relate to objects within their social environment — whether ideas, persons, or cultural practices. By assigning value to an object, individuals organize and interpret the information they receive, contributing to the elaboration of a social representation that is both personal and shaped by the norms and expectations of the group.

In the Lebanese context, the values attributed to a choreographic

work — or extracted from it by the censorship committee — depend directly on the committee members' own perceptions. The censorship committee, composed of seven members appointed by the General Security and drawn from several ministries as well as religious institutions, exercises disproportionate power, despite its members not necessarily possessing artistic expertise. They hold the authority to censor an entire work or demand the removal of specific scenes. Mona Merhi, in an article entitled The History of Censorship in Lebanon, highlights the structural flaws of the censorship system applied to artistic works (Merhi, 2017). She explains that the law governing censorship of the performing arts was adopted without parliamentary vote and introduced as an exceptional wartime measure during the civil war, yet remains in force to this day.

The judgments issued by this committee — often arbitrary and grounded in subjective perceptions of art — frequently result in the alteration or mutilation of works. This process generates consequences on multiple levels. In the short term, artists are compelled to accept modified versions of their works under threat of cancellation. In the medium term, intimidation effects foster self-censorship, as artists begin to shape their creations according to the norms imposed by the committee. In the long term, the emergence of a broad, informed, and curious audience is undermined, progressively reducing viewership to a small elitist circle incapable of further development. Thus, this form of state control through censorship does not merely affect individual artistic works; it profoundly alters the Lebanese cultural landscape, diminishing diversity of expression and the richness of the artistic scene.

State repression, however, is not the sole obstacle to artistic freedom. Another form of censorship — social rather than institutional — emerges from segments of the public influenced by religious and partisan affiliations. In certain regions, pressure groups stemming from communities homogeneous in confessional or political terms position themselves as guardians of morality and ideology, demanding the prohibition of performances they deem offensive. This dual censorship — state and social — operates within a logic of permanent pressure, rendering artistic denunciation almost impossible.

Alexandre Paulikevitch provides an emblematic example. A

performer of baladi dance[3] — a form traditionally associated with women — Paulikevitch has faced persistent social censorship. Conservative groups, shaped by religious or partisan affiliations, regard his performances as offensive. This social pressure not only restricts his artistic freedom of expression and imposes limitations on performances perceived as deviant, but at one point even led to his arrest, illustrating the intensity of the constraints artists may face in Lebanon.

Beyond the immediate limitations it imposes, censorship in Lebanon functions as a tool for shaping minds, molding the perceptions of future generations. By narrowing the available cultural framework, it does not merely stifle artistic expression; it operates as a mechanism of domination, constraining the development of creative thought and controlling the formation of social representations of the performing arts, including dance. This phenomenon is particularly troubling given that censorship does not rely on clear and precise legal texts, but rather on the subjective opinions of members of the "censorship committee" and pressure groups.

This limitation on choreographic creation and the control of themes addressed does not merely restrict the artist's margin of freedom as a right; it establishes power over the cognitive frameworks of future generations by modifying their frames of reference and normalizing a reduced conception of freedom. Over time, this normalization makes it possible to increase the degree of censorship without provoking resistance. Such control over the very idea of freedom among future generations ultimately leads to total political control. This impact becomes entrenched over the years as an insidious reality, fully normalized.

Nevertheless, artists have developed various strategies to resist the system. Some incorporate improvised scenes into sequences authorized by the General Security, while others attempt to perform without prior authorization, accepting the potential consequences. This was the case of Hanane Hajj Ali, who in 2016 refused to submit her solo performance Jogging to censorship and chose to present it

[3] A form of Middle Eastern dance also known as belly dance

without permission. She opted to perform free of charge in alternative spaces, such as refugee camps and galleries, in order to circumvent the restrictions imposed by Lebanese censorship law on theatrical works. This decision was motivated by her commitment to addressing sensitive themes such as sexuality, politics, and religion (Hajj Ali, 2021).

Others, such as Alexandre Paulikevitch, use their platform to raise public awareness regarding issues of gender, identity, and freedom of expression, transforming their art into a genuine tool of social transformation. He employs his artistic practice as a political act and as a means of challenging restrictive societal norms (Paulikevitch, 2018). As Lebanese director Lina Saneh aptly summarizes, dealing with censorship involves either submitting the text to censors without implementing all their decisions, refusing to submit it, self-censoring, or liberating oneself entirely from such constraints (Cachard & Nemer, 2019).

*** Conclusion**

In Lebanon, censorship extends far beyond a mere restriction of individual freedoms; it becomes a mechanism for manipulating collective memory and maintaining social control over artistic expression. It reveals a profound contradiction between proclaimed democratic principles and the reality of constraints imposed upon creators. By limiting artists' freedom of expression — whether institutionally or socially — censorship durably shapes the collective perception of art, depriving it of its fundamental role of questioning and critical reflection. Dance, in particular, finds itself trapped between cultural norms, religious considerations, and political interests, which hinder its development and its accessibility to the broader public. This form of control corresponds closely to a hidden dictatorship that regulates the Lebanese choreographic scene and constrains free production in this field.

Yet history demonstrates that art, even when repressed, invariably finds paths of expression and resistance. In the face of threats to artistic freedom, it remains essential to defend the right of creators to express themselves without constraint, so that art may fully assume its role in the construction of an open and plural society. An urgent reflection on the mechanisms of censorship and their impact on Lebanon's cultural and social evolution is therefore vital. Only a more open cultural policy, respectful

of artists' rights, can enable Lebanon to genuinely uphold its commitments to fundamental freedoms.

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