

**Disremembered:**  
**Beirut's Collective Body of Trauma**

Dominic Romano

Film 199

Peter Limbrick

June 12, 2014

### ~INTRODUCTION~

*“I used to feel that I could only have deep thoughts when plunged in darkness. In there I can go in a vertical descent to the bottom of my soul.” - Ali Cherri, *Un Cercle Autour du Soleil**

Ali Cherri envisions trauma as a deeply-rooted human experience. In *Un Cercle Autour du Soleil* (2005) he recounts traumatic memories of living through the Lebanese Civil War, which lasted from 1975 to 1990 and left at least 100,000 dead. Leaving countless others missing and a profusion of unanswered questions in its aftermath, the war endures through Cherri's video and is manifested through images of darkness. The video's narration identifies this darkness as a place of suppression, of comfort amidst obscured and latent wounds that are not ready to heal.

The video itself begins with a pan over Beirut's silhouetted skyline at sunset, then cuts to a shot of Beirut's night sky, with the moon as the only visible source of light. During this sequence, a voiceover (in fact narrated by Cherri himself) gracefully speaks the lines quoted above and begins a retrospection that has a visual analogue. Another shot later in the film displays the remains of war-damaged buildings bathed in blinding sunlight and sets the course of the video in motion. Here, the presence of light in every scene and the transition from night to day illuminates the evolution that takes place across the video: where Cherri wakes from the anesthesia of darkness and confronts his interred trauma.

The works analyzed in this thesis all undergo an evolution through their direct confrontations and representations of trauma. Whether in Cherri's images of darkness, Ghassan Salhab's incarnation of the phantom in *Beyrouth Fantôme* (1998), or the work of a pyromaniacal

photographer in Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's installation *Wonder Beirut*, the traumatic after effects of the war are revisited, confronted, and re-imagined. What distinguishes the work of these artists is not simply that they manage creative endeavors in a challenging cultural situation, but that in summoning past traumas, they allow the viewer to empathize and feel the pain that they unearth.

To understand this capacity, I frame my thesis around an underlying motif of death that, I argue, lends an emotional accessibility to the work of these artists and foregrounds the ambiguous fate of modern Beirut. Death, in any shape or form, is a primal fact of life and is, thus, familiar to everyone. Michel Guiomar, in his long essay *Principes d'une Esthétique de la Mort*, uses this familiarity to identify the manifestation of death across various works of literature, visual art, and music in the context of three major categories—the natural, fantastical, and metaphysical. The essay's interrelated subsections within each category intricately explore the aesthetic and thematic significance of death as it evolves from an abstract phenomenon into distinct and complex examples. Guiomar's essay is the starting point for my own analysis. Through a similar framework, and in three main sections, my thesis identifies the motifs of death by which these artists confront personal and cultural traumas.

The first section here, "Le funèbre," establishes Guiomar's notion of a cycle of life and death that underlies the literary texts he cites and traces that cycle through Ghassan Salhab's films *Beyrouth Fantôme* and *The Last Man* (2006) and Ali Cherri's video *Ma Souffrance est Réelle*. Each of Salhab's films invokes this underlying cycle through the figure of the phantom and the vampire respectively. Bakhtin's discourse on the unfinalizable nature of meaning and interpretation helps me to demonstrate the significance of representing the undead within these

films as they act to reincarnate war-induced trauma. Further on, this section will analyze the transcendence of life and death in the same image that is created in Ali Cherri's video and will turn to Bakhtin's discourse on Otherness and Walid Sadek's delineations of a healing culture—before and after the war—in his essay “Laissez-passer.” At its end, the section likens Guimar's notion of an underlying cycle of life and death to the circular and ambiguous state of post-war Beirut. This comparison is, finally, considered through Benjamin's call for recognition of the past as a means of engaging with trauma in the present, an argument he pursues in “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”

In “Le Crêpusculaire,” Guimar frames his analysis of the manifestation of death in literary and musical works that invoke the idea of ambiguity through encounters with abstract and conceptual themes. For example, the author clarifies this interest by comparing death's role in Dante's *Inferno* with the transitional phase between night and day. In my analysis, death appears as an ambiguous force in the physical and emotional ruins of Beirut in *A Perfect Day* (2006) and *Je Veux Voir* (2008), both directed by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige; *(Posthumous)* (2007) by Ghassan Salhab; and *Un Cercle Autour du Soleil* by Ali Cherri. Hadjithomas and Joreige's films embody ruins in their fictional and docu-fiction narratives that deal with the continuum of destruction and construction and life and death in Lebanon. Drawing on the thematic tenets of Arabic poetry, Stefan Sperl's *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, and especially his writing on the role of the *atlal* (or ruin, where the poet is separated from his beloved), offers a way of analyzing ruins in these films. Salhab's documentary video essay represents the ruins of Beirut after a 2006 bombardment by Israel through superimposed images of demolition and salvage work, archival footage, and faces that look directly into the camera.

His multi-layered project embodies the ruin as a personal, cultural, and historical trauma. In working through his use of superimposition as a cinematic device, I turn to Saree Makdisi's essay "Beirut/*Beirut*" and Peter Limbrick's article "After-effects" in order to contextualize the video as an attempt to capture the ambiguity of the war and not to suppress traumatic memories. Finally, we return to Cherri's video, which uses narration and manipulated images of Beirut's ruins to translate the experiences of the war to the viewer through corporeal and emotional confessions.

My analysis of "Le Double Affectif" considers Guiomar's notion of a duality between life and death through the manipulation of photographs and information. Here, the photograph possesses the capacity of reflection rather than only existing as a descriptive medium. This capacity is examined in three projects that visually depict Beirut's past and present: an installation by Hadjithomas and Joreige, the archival uncoverings of Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad (The Atlas Group), and one of Raad's independent projects, *Secrets of the Open Sea*. These artists explore the effects of manipulating photographs and information and question the original context of images against the possibility of their personal interpretation. Roland Barthes' discourse on photography in *Camera Lucida* grounds my analysis of the photograph as it is represented and functioned in the works of these artists. I then use Benjamin's discourse on history to consider the overall import of the photograph in preserving memory and explore the capacity of manipulation to bridge fiction with reality.

With these notions in mind, the pages that follow examine Beirut and Lebanon by approaching the manifestation of death across the work of these contemporary artists. An evolution spans the thesis as these manifestations occupy different roles through different works; yet the argument is always rooted in death and its function in the aftermath of the war.

~LE FUNÈBRE~

In a subsection from the natural category of his essay, entitled “Le Funèbre,” Guiomar cites Courbet’s painting *l’Enterrement à Ornans* (as one of many other examples) to exemplify a manifestation of death that he aims to illuminate for the reader. Inspired by the painting’s detailed rendition of death as a natural, emotional, and physical sadness for the funeral-goers, Guiomar writes: “Ce mal de retour...trahit dans notre optique, un désir inconscient de Mort considérée comme achèvement d’un cycle, comme retour à un temps irrémédiablement perdu... le Monde présent est refusé.”<sup>1</sup> Here, in the context of Courbet’s painting, the author considers a duality between life and death that is present within the same image, a duality that is evidenced in the literal presence of the dead amongst the living. Guiomar thus treats death, as it is revealed in the painting, as the completion of a cycle by which the primacy of the present is refused.

Guiomar’s methodology and conclusions in “Le Funèbre.” supported by closely detailed analyses, provide a framework that articulates the inherent presence of death in the work he explores. In this section, I examine specific scenes and the use of distinct cinematic devices to establish and characterize the manifestation of death in two films by Ghassan Salhab and a video piece by Ali Cherri. I reference Guiomar’s consideration of a duality between life and death in order to consider and frame the work of these artists through a focused approach that identifies the war-induced traumas they are confronting. I also reinforce my analyses by contextualizing them both within Mikhail Bakhtin’s writing on unfinalizability (in his consideration of a polyphony of meaning and interpretation in dialogue) and within Walter Benjamin’s call for an

---

1. Michel Guiomar, *Principes d’une Esthétique de la Mort*, 170. (hereafter cited in text as *PM*)  
 Trans: “This difficulty of return...betrays in our perspective, an unconscious desire to consider Death as the completion of a cycle, as a return to a time irremediably lost...the present world is refused.”

unearthing of the past in his discourse on History. The contentions of both theorists offer a means of revealing the existence, in these cinematic renderings of Beirut, of the immanent role of death and its representation as cyclical.

## THE EXHUMED

Salhab's *Beyrouth Fantôme* (1998) revolves around the return of Khalil (Aouni Kawas), who, thought to have disappeared in the violence of the Lebanese civil war, reappears in Beirut and reemerges in the lives of friends who had just begun to forget him. The film uses a multi-diegetic narrative structure that alternates between sequences of its actors both in and out of character—recalling personal experiences of the war directly to the camera, while also performing in fictionalized revisitations of them. The progression of this narrative construction intimates the presence of a duality between fiction and reality that is further delineated and complicated by Khalil's "resurrection," which in turn, joins life and death and past and present within the same historical moment. In this section, I consider the evolution of these dualities and their toll on the characters as they face truths thought to have been buried long ago.

In an interview cited in Mark Westmoreland's dissertation, "Crisis of Representation: Experimental Documentary in Postwar Lebanon," Salhab describes Beirut as "'a crack,' ... in which daily life cannot escape from a perpetual present; the past is irretrievable, the future unavailable."<sup>2</sup> The director's characterization of Beirut is pronounced in Hanna (Darina Al Joundi)'s testimonial in the opening lines of the film, as she describes a reality in which the war has not ended since it lacks "une véritable mort...une mort franche... Nous voulons renaître

---

2. Mark Westmoreland, "Crisis of Representation," 235.

alors que nous ne sommes pas vraiment morts...nous sommes juste des mourants.”<sup>3</sup> The film’s stasis is immediately disrupted, however, when the characters recognize Khalil and the fine line between their pasts and the present begins to blur.

Khalil’s resurrection effectively intertwines the film’s fictional sequences with their testimonial counterparts and, as a result, delineates the dualities between life and death and past and present. I argue that Khalil’s capability of achieving this integration distinguishes him as the Other amidst the friends and the city he left behind throughout the course of the film. Bakhtin’s analysis of literary dialogue in his essay “Towards a Methodology for the Human Sciences” is helpful in establishing this distinction, particularly in the context of his contention against the totalized interpretation or finalizability of meaning in a text. In his text, Bakhtin identifies “exotopy”—the outsideness or distance that rests between a researcher and his object/reader and his text—as what sustains the difference between two texts, and thusly as the explanation for meaning never being final. He writes, further on, that “at every moment of the dialogue, there are immense and unlimited masses of forgotten meanings, but, in some subsequent moments, as the dialogue moves forwards, they will return to memory and live in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will celebrate its rebirth.”<sup>4</sup> Here, Bakhtin’s notion of undying meanings functions through his examination of dialogue to negate the existence of finalized interpretations; he instead illuminates an underlying cycle of semantic re-interpretation and reclamation. In an extra-literary contextualization of Bakhtin’s contention, *Fantôme*’s narrative structure similarly problematizes a linear development through its

---

3. *Beyrouth Fantôme*, directed by Ghassan Salhab (1998; Beirut: GH Films, 1998), DVD. Trans. “an authentic death...a true death...we wish to be reborn even though we are not really dead...we are only dying.”

4. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Towards a Methodology for the Human Sciences,” 373.



fluctuation across multi-diegetic constructs. That is, much like the way Bakhtin points to the cyclical nature of dialogue via the renewal of forgotten meanings, Khalil's resurrection hints at the presence of an unrevealed cycle; one perpetuated by the dualities between life and death and past and present as they are both represented and reinforced through the film's distinct visual and thematic oppositions. The uncovering of such a cycle, by way of Khalil's return, resurfaces a forgotten past of violence, death, and destruction (on which the characters reminisce in their testimonials), and as a result, designates him as the Other.

Salhab's depiction of Khalil throughout the film provides a visual index to his designation as the Other, specifically in the portrayal of his physical distance from his friends. One sequence early on in the film clearly illustrates this technique, presenting Khalil's first confrontation with his former girlfriend, Hanna, (Al-Joundi). As the proprietor of her apartment building helps him out of a stalled elevator, she catches a glimpse of Khalil's figure as he climbs into the under-lit corridor. He stands to face her and, in a cut to a medium shot of all three in the corridor, is seen obscured behind a frosted glass door. After the proprietor leaves them, Hanna invites Khalil into her room and is met, moments later, with a knock at her door. The light from her apartment door accentuates the silhouettes of the group of friends waiting impatiently outside, as they whisper to each other in the corridor. Within seconds, the sound of their murmured conversation immediately wanes as a blurred and back-lit figure approaches. Khalil stands shadowed before his friends, the silence in the room now eerily apparent, as if syphoned by his presence.

The tension within this sequence is intensified as Khalil is distinguished from the other characters through Salhab's manipulations of *mise-en-scène* and of sound. More specifically, the

film's use of high-contrast lighting and dynamic use of changes in volume and of silence reflect the subtext of the scene and foreground the ambiguity felt towards Khalil by his friends.

Moreover, Khalil's visual contradistinction from Hanna and the other characters emphasizes his own influence/manipulation on the film's multi-diegetic structure in regards to his interruption of a 'perpetual present.'

The trauma enacted in the film as a consequence of Khalil's presence is also manifested through recurring moments of violence which are represented through entanglements of extra-diegetic sound and archival footage. Ceaseless sounds of explosions and gunfire throughout the film vivify the tension felt by its characters, while images of militants firing at each other visually personify the recounts of war in their testimonies. As more of the film's underlying cycle is uncovered, and as past violence is revisited and re-inhabits the stasis of the present, destruction eats away at the order that was present before Khalil's "resurrection." The film's evolution reaches its conclusion with the discovery that Khalil has once again disappeared. The tension and ambiguity, however, remain as his Khalil's friends are once again faced with the ever-changing realities of a war they thought finished and, consequently, the realization that nothing is absolutely dead.

In Salhab's *The Last Man*, Khalil Shams (Carlos Chahine) is faced with the possibility that he has become a vampire and he subsequently witnesses his own physical deterioration as he enters the realm of the undead. The film depicts a series of mysterious murders occurring throughout Beirut, where victims end up in hospitals with no signs of violence other than bite marks. It's in one of these hospitals that Khalil, who works as a doctor, comes to suspect that he may, in fact, be the one committing the crimes. The physical and emotional conversion Khalil

endures is manifested in the film as an ever-present duality of internal and external death that Salhab visually represents through lighting, super-impositions of images, and auditory manipulations. Within this duality, notions of otherness and postwar subjectivity recall Guiomar's consideration of an incessant cycle of death, manifested through Khalil's role as a Vampire, as he hungers for blood in the ever-darkening streets of Beirut.

The film uses lighting as a means of translating Khalil's experience to the viewer, steadily shifting from rays of sunlight earlier in the film to the faint gleam of streetlights towards its end. I find it worth mentioning here, as it is relevant to the film's change in lighting, that in Arabic Khalil's last name, "Shams", means "sun." With that in mind, this visual metamorphosis is also paralleled by Khalil's withering health, as he becomes paler and thinner with every passing scene; the most jarring of which presents him collapsing on a street corner, wincing with pain as he grasps his stomach and endures the persistent agony of rotting from within. The visual and aural elements that represent Khalil's embodiment of the undead, in scenes like the last, work to identify him as the manifestation of death. I reference two other scenes within the film that also dramatically chronicle Khalil's conversion to re-affirm the presence of an incessant cycle of death and more closely engage with the devices that reveal it.

In the first of these scenes, Khalil and a group of his colleagues have met at a restaurant in the early evening. He sits facing the others with his back to a floor to ceiling window permeated by beaming sunlight. As the group begins to converse, the camera tracks slowly in towards Khalil as the sun begins to envelop more of his body. While the camera inches closer through a dolly zoom — producing an effect that is both entrancing and disconcerting for the tension it ushers in — the sound of the surrounding conversations begins to fade out and is

slowly replaced with a rising shrill tone. Khalil sits still at the table, having lost track of his surroundings, and is drenched in near-blinding sunlight. With the camera now trapping him in a tightening medium close-up and the piercing tone even louder than before, his unease becomes palpable. The searing agitation of the sequence meets its end when Khalil raspingly curses about the heat and becomes aware of his surroundings. The moment he re-emerges from his trance, the stinging tone that percolated within the sequence returns to the soft ambiance of the restaurant and with it the sun returns to its initial gleam. In this sequence, and in others like it, Khalil's otherness is represented through the manipulation of lighting and through cinematographic techniques that work to increasingly emphasize his deterioration across the film. Within this vein of otherness, I return to Bakhtin for a closer examination of Khalil's embodiment of the undead and to identify death as it is manifested through his role as the vampire.

In "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," Bakhtin offers a consideration of self-other relations that become useful in identifying Khalil as the Other. Here, Bakhtin delineates a fundamental divergence in the way one experiences the self as opposed to one's experience of the other, and considers the outcomes of self-representation. In the lack of any approach we have from outside the self, he recognizes "a peculiar 'emptiness,' 'ghostliness,' or 'solitariness' that indicates a self encountered in isolation from the world, inner feeling, and will."<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin describes the phenomenon of confronting the self in his text as having the effect of an "uncomfortable 'doubling.'" In the context of the film, this same doubling allows us to analyze Khalil's inability to exist on either side of life or death. For death's manifestation in the film as the Vampire leaves Khalil devoid of a self in designating him as the Other. Bakhtin also writes

---

5. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," 30.

that “although it is possible to attain some sense of the self [through representing the self objectively], it always remains hollow...”<sup>6</sup> Thus, Khalil’s body becomes a vessel for death wherein any inkling of a self, of a consciousness, withers and, consequently, dispossesses him of a subjectivity, a past, a future, and a pulse.

A subsequent scene also evidences Khalil’s loss of a self to his role as the manifestation of death. Khalil takes a seat at the counter of a bar and notices the dim lighting that paints the walls blood-red. A woman sitting next to him motions to grab his attention and is met with his blank and ghostly stare. Disturbed by the chilling emptiness of his gaze, the woman demands that he not look at her that way. As a somber Khalil turns back to his drink amidst the indistinct decorations of the bar, the woman turns and peers into the mirror in front of them both, petrified from seeing only her reflection. Khalil’s lack of an image in this scene corresponds with the characterization of the vampire in Jalal Toufiq’s essay, *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*. Toufiq writes that “the vampire has no mirror image even in the form of body-image, hence he does not and cannot have a phantom limb... The dead’s reconnaissance in the undead realm fails both because such a realm is labyrinthine, and because he or she no longer has an image, and hence can feel no sense of recognition.”<sup>7</sup>

With regards to Bakhtin’s words in analysis of the first scene, Toufiq’s contention further exemplifies the effects of otherness, but also functions to validate my reading of the Vampire as the manifestation of Death in *The Last Man*. Westmoreland, in his dissertation, writes, “while the nonsubject is intensely emotional, its affect is withdrawn and seemingly dispassionate. These

---

6. Ibid.

7. Jalal Toufiq, *Vampires*, 40.

undead entities have been rendered mute, and yet, their “invisible” presence is evoked in the image, revealing their withdrawn absent presence.”<sup>8</sup> Both Westmoreland and Toufiq provide a lens through which to compare Khalil’s internal “self” against the non-existent external image present in the scene. Khalil’s lack of an image accentuates the emptiness elicited from the transformation he undergoes throughout the film and represents the death of the self at the hands of the other as his “invisible presence” finalizes his place in the undead realm. Thus, Khalil’s darkened reality is fixed when his vacant presence is inhabited by death’s manifestation as the vampire, condemning him to a perpetual existence between life and death and betwixt the poles of the film’s duality of the internal and external.

Salhab utilizes superimposition within the film to visually embody the ambiguity of Khalil’s transformation, at times presenting several images of him within the same frame. The most remarkable of these instances comes when Khalil walks down a dimly lit corridor, his figure superimposed within another image of himself walking but further away. The medium shot here presents the image of Khalil’s face looking directly into the camera but within that shot is contained another, smaller version of Khalil. In this moment, Salhab allows us to see Khalil lost within the ‘labyrinthine’ realm of the undead—in the space between life and death, self and other, past and future—searching for, but never finding, his reflection.

Ali Cherri’s video *Ma Souffrance est Réelle* transcends the hold of the undead by bridging the poles within the duality of life and death presented above through a visual confrontation with death. The video begins with the artist’s hand sweeping across the screen, revealing his own face centered in a tight frame, as he rests still while staring directly into the

---

8. Westmoreland, “Crisis of Representation,” 242.

camera. From here, a web cursor (a hand icon) appears and steadily scrubs across Cherri's face. Gradually, the viewer notices that the cursor, in mimicking the "paintbrush" or "soften" feature of a program like Adobe Photoshop, is superimposing fragmented images of the dead and injured over the initial frame. The first of these instances is revealed on Cherri's nose, in which the darkening, breaking and peeling of the skin reveals the drained color and appearance of a corpse. This process spreads to reveal the same effect on the artist's lips, and the manipulation leaves what looks to be a contaminated laceration across his left cheek. Midway through the video the hand cursor disappears and returns as a normal black triangular pointer. With its clicks, it too applies images of the dead onto Cherri's now mutilated face. The first clicks steadily reveal an eye swollen shut and rotting patches across the rest of his face. As the viewer examines this disfiguring transformation, the image freezes and Cherri's hand swipes across the frame, now in the opposite direction. With his hand now out of the frame, his face has returned to its initial, untouched state. The end of the video maintains the same frame as he takes a deep breath while still gazing into the camera, then goes black.

In analyzing Cherri's piece, we might well consider Walid Sadek's article "Laissez-Passer" in *TAMÁSS: Contemporary Arab Representations*, where Sadek writes: "one of the debts incurred by a society plunged into long and complex wars, is that of re-writing these wars and of re-presenting them as tangible proof and witness to the sacrifices of a society desperately trying to find its way back to the 'home of humanity'..."<sup>9</sup> The transformation undergone in Cherri's piece allows for such proof to emanate through the image and lace itself within the artist's present. In a duality similar to that explored in the two earlier films, the notions of

---

9. Walid Sadek, "Laissez-Passer," 15-16.

internal versus external and life versus death reemerge as Cherri confronts the transcendence of death within the image.

Revisiting Bakhtin's notion of "a peculiar 'emptiness,' 'ghostliness,' or 'solitariness' that indicates a self encountered in isolation from the world, inner feeling, and will," I argue that Cherri's emptiness is what elicits the return of dead. In another part of *Author and Hero*, Bakhtin offers the notion that the self can only be complete or consummated by the other.<sup>10</sup> In the context of the video, this idea is illustrated through Cherri's choice of joining his own image with those of the dead within the same frame. Here, the artist's representation of himself and, more specifically, his use of the cursor throughout the piece to summon up latent images of death demonstrates a visual embodiment of Bakhtin's notion of "hollowness." Moreover, Cherri's choice to frame his own face as a canvas on which the dead are re-written and represented exemplifies, in keeping with Sadek's observation, the visual manifestation of the undead. So too does the complete lack of sound throughout the piece, lending an aural counterpart to the hollow body the artist offers up.

At the end of Sadek's article is an image, *Untitled* (2000), in which two versions of himself are depicted on either side of a line tracing down the middle of the frame. The version on the left presents his face in a normal state eyeing the camera, and on the other a disfigured, swollen version whose haunting stare permeates the camera due to its unsettling desperation. The marked contrast Sadek's pairing of images presents personifies the liminal state of the dualities of life and death, self and other, and past and present explored in this section. I use Sadek's image to analyze Cherri's, whose video also rests within this liminal state and allows for the

---

10. Bakhtin, "Author and Hero," 166.



interlacing of the dualities as presented in Sadek's image. The transformation undergone by Cherri in his video ends with his second sweeping motion and the subsequent return to his original unblemished state. Cherri's ability to control his presence within the liminal state of the aforementioned dualities elucidates the necessity to engage with either side in order to, as Sadek writes, find the "way back to the 'home of humanity.'"

Walter Benjamin's essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" offers a means of engaging with the past and reading it in the present context emphasizes the similarities that exist in the work of these artists. Their encounters within the ambiguous realm of the undead speak to Benjamin's notion that "the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up when it can be recognized and is never seen again...for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."<sup>11</sup> He also furthers this thought, writing that seizing the past "means to seize hold of memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."<sup>12</sup> Salhab and Cherri's exploration of the undead through their work engage with and answer Benjamin's call for a recognition of a buried past. The resurrection of Khalil, the rotting of Khalil (Shams), and the disfigurement of Cherri exist at a clashing point of life and death, and self and Other, and past and present. These films work towards unveiling the incessant cycle brought out in Guiomar's text and expanded in Benjamin's delineations of a history that repeats itself unless flashes of the past are preserved. The evolutions endured in each film exemplify these flashes and preserve them but ultimately we are forced to watch as they flicker out and return to their fresh graves. The presence of an underlying cycle of life and death within

---

11. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.

12. Ibid.

these works is revealed through the artists's seizing hold of flashes of the past in moments of danger, as described by Benjamin, by manifesting death through various characters. These revisitations of the past go beyond the work of Salhab and Cherri by engaging with ghostly trails of destruction and violence left by the war and its place within the perpetual present, the crack, in which Beirut finds itself.

### ~LE CRÉPUSCULAIRE~

In another section of his "natural" category, entitled "Le Crépusculaire," Guiomar associates an underlying theme of uncertainty with the fleeting moments that rest between night and day. He recognizes the ambiguity of this transitional phase in various works of art, citing Dante's nine circles of Hell in *Inferno* as an example. For Guiomar, the narrator's descent into each circle reflects the capacity of the *crépuscule* in joining other categories within the text. Several corollaries stem from his consideration of what constitutes this incertitude; he notes some as: "l'indécision, le doute, le scepticisme, l'attente, l'inquiétude, l'espoir. Le crépuscule réel introduit aussi les climats de clair-obscur, de contre-jour, de contre-nuit, de sonorité étouffée, de demi-teinte" (*PM*, 135).<sup>13</sup> Here, Guiomar's differentiation of a conceptual and natural sunset illuminates a duality comprised of the constructing elements of incertitude listed above. He clarifies this distinction in writing, "l'aube s'affirme comme une lumière pressentie, un espoir de fait certain, la promesse du jour. Seul le crépuscule du soir demeure ce qu'il était étymologiquement, une incertitude, comme si un inconscient collectif refusait, à l'issue de cette hésitation du jour, un nocturne inévitable: le mot implique, avec un refus de la nuit, l'aveu d'une crainte" (*PM*, 138).<sup>14</sup> The author's consideration of incertitude stems from his association of death with darkness within both the conceptual and natural realms of this section.

---

13. Trans. "indecision, doubt, skepticism, expectation, anxiety, hope. The natural sunset also introduces the phenomena of half-light, dawn, dusk, muffled sounds, and half-tone."

14. Trans. "dawn asserts itself like an anticipated light, the hope of a known fact, the promise of daylight. Only the sunset remains what it was etymologically, an uncertainty, as if a collective unconscious refused, in light of the hesitation of daybreak, an inevitable darkness: the word implies, with a refusal of the night, an admission of fear."

*Le crépusculaire*'s capacity as a binding force for night and day, and its role in conjoining other categories in Guiomar's text, allows for an analysis of the theme of ruins in the work of Hadjithomas and Joreige, Ali Cherri and Ghassan Salhab. My analysis focuses on images of ruins to identify the manifestation of death through structural and thematic tenets of Arabic poetry and to understand the place of uncertainty as an underlying motif that sheds light on cultural, historical and memory-related traumas.

## TRANSCENDENCE

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's film, *A Perfect Day*, revolves around Malek, a young Beirut man suffering from sleep apnea. Throughout the film, Malek consistently dozes off from resting immobile for long periods, an affliction that takes hold of him at home, work, and even in traffic. Malek's experience embodies the uncertainty manifested in *le crépusculaire* through his perpetual place within a liminal state of waking and sleeping. The consequences of his role within this state are most pronounced in confrontations with his girlfriend, Zeina, who has ended their relationship after growing tired of his detachment from reality. The filmmakers use Malek's longing to reconnect with Zeina to provide a visual representation of his condition, one that allows the viewer to vicariously engage with his absent presence.

Stefan Sperl's reading of the ruin in *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, an analysis of structure and major themes throughout the Arabic tradition of poetry, helps us to establish Malek's role in the film thanks to Sperl's focus on fate. Sperl considers *atlal*, a term he defines as a "section of the qasida [the most characteristic poetic form in Arabic] bemoaning the remains of the encampment where the poet once met his beloved."<sup>15</sup> The *atlal* is entangled with the theme of

---

15. Sperl, Stefan, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry*, 23.

fate, Sperl writes, contending that “fate brings the poet and his beloved together and separates them again, scattering them in distant lands. Its rule is blind, indiscriminate, and men are but the helpless victims. The continuity it establishes is neutral and meaningless: in time, life and death, construction and destruction, cancel each other. Between the two, man is ground to dust, his hopes thwarted, his beliefs questioned.”<sup>16</sup> Here, the thematic connections drawn between fate and the *atlal* frame Malek’s experience throughout the course of the film; for he exists within the perpetual continuum of construction and destruction and life and death — amidst the ruins of postwar Beirut. His place within this transitional phase also finds him separated from his beloved, left to bemoan her absence but never being afforded a presence. When considered alongside the film, and in the context of Guimaraes’s consideration of uncertainty, Sperl’s contentions allow for a more informed analysis of the specific visual devices that represent the effect Malek’s circumstances and condition have on his personal life.

For example, after Malek reconciles with Zeina at a packed nightclub, they drive off into the streets of Beirut together, kissing passionately in the thrill of their reunion. Sounds of muted car horns blare off screen as Malek holds the wheel and repeatedly glimpses the road ahead before returning to Zeina’s embrace. He resolves to park the car and the two carry on kissing in a rapid succession of close-ups that accentuate their desire. Wanting to have sex, the two have Malek call a friend in hopes of finding an empty room, but he is met with no answer and opts to drive on. Zeina, now complaining of discomfort in her eyes, takes off her contact lenses, and falls back underneath Malek’s arm. With the hurried cadence of their passion steadily dwindling as Malek continues driving aimlessly through the streets of Beirut, Zeina suddenly pulls away

---

16. Ibid.

from him, implores him to stop the car, and opens the door before saying, “I’m fed up. It’s over, I don’t want to. It’s always the same we won’t get anywhere. I’m not going over it all again.” This sequence establishes the state of Zeina and Malek’s relationship by visually representing the ambiguous continuum that consumes him—and that once consumed her. From the distinct change in rhythm between the impassioned rush of its start to the tedium of its ending, this sequence shows that for Zeina staying with Malek symbolizes ruin, and as she runs off down a darkened street, we know that she’s escaped the *atlat*.

Malek, however, drives on. A scene later in the film shows him in a long shot idling at an embankment off the unlit highway. From inside his car he notices the contact lenses Zeina left behind and inserts them into his own eyes. Through this wholly new perspective, the screen is permeated by bokeh and accompanied by the sound of horns and traffic aimed at Malek’s car as he looks out vacantly. This sequence demonstrates the extent of Malek’s longing for Zeina through his altering of his own perspective in order to be closer to her. Though she is absent, his closest thing to being reunited is to see through her eyes—staring ahead at the indistinct gleam of oncoming traffic.

With Sperl’s notion in mind, this sequence presents Malek’s experience through a visual manifestation of the *atlat*; where his entrapment between reality and dreamscape (waking and sleeping) take shape. The filmmakers’ personification of Malek’s perspective submerges the viewer within the ambiguous void that he occupies throughout the film and holds them there. Here, the viewer not only sees Malek surrounded by the ruins of his unavailing longing for Zeina, but, in looking ahead at the indistinct trail of lights, sees the lingering after-effects, the unceasing ambiguity, of post-war Beirut. Sperl’s neutral and meaningless continuity is

manifested through the filmmakers' manipulation of focus in this sequence and frames the likeness between Malek's condition and the cultural moment he exists in. The ambiguity explored through Malek's character engages with a larger cultural situation that articulates Guiomar's underlying notion of uncertainty and returns in another of the filmmaking duo's films.

*Je Veux Voir* examines Beirut and Lebanon's ruins through two distinct perspectives that consider the motif of uncertainty within a duality of past and present, and self and other. The documentary brings in Catherine Deneuve, a foreigner, to see and engage with the remains of the war in modern Beirut. In *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon*, Ken Seigneurie examines Lebanese novels, films and modern politics that further an aesthetic of resistance by engaging with the war and its consequences. The author's elegiac visioning of the past and considerations for the future impart an immediacy to the present that is elaborated in his close analysis of texts. His considerations of a "standing-by-the-ruins topos," identifies these perspectives while also expanding on Guiomar and Sperl's notions. Specifically, Seigneurie argues that:

Through the re-appropriated ruins topos, memory and nostalgia are sharpened in order to deepen consciousness of the past but without licensing identitarianism. Standing by the ruins avoids the notorious danger of nostalgia: 'Nostalgia is paradoxical in the sense that longing can make us more empathetic toward fellow humans, yet the moment we try to repair longing with belonging, the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity, we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding.' By positing longing as an aesthetic value independent of its object, the ruins topos conditions empathy rather than identity."<sup>17</sup>

Seigneurie's consideration of aesthetic value as a means of confronting the ruin without renouncing one's own identity elucidates the significance of Deneuve's presence in the film. The

---

17. Ken Seigneurie, *Standing by the Ruins*, 19.

actress's unfamiliarity with the country allows her to question the place of longing and belonging as she observes the ruins left by the war. Moreover, her presence allows Mroué, an actor playing a role in the film but also playing himself, to revisit his own experiences and memories of his country through the eyes of a foreigner. Mroué's presence, in particular his interactions with the actress, also calls attention to the film's hybridity of documentary and fiction — its status as such left ambiguous throughout. One shot in the film visually culminates Deneuve's status as a foreigner and foregrounds her role in the film as a new lens through which to examine the remnants of the civil war.

As her tour begins, she is seen looking out through a car's passenger-side window at the streets of Beirut. The surrounding cityscape is reflected through the glass and warped as damaged and bullet-riddled buildings flash past. Within this shot are telling juxtapositions of Deneuve's curious eyes, jagged buildings, and more significantly, the glass that separates them. For these juxtapositions epitomize her presence in relation to Mroué as an outsider, now witnessing the immediate trauma suffered by the country instead of through a distant television screen. Her presence allows Mroué to re-evaluate his own memories and relationship to the war, a possibility that Seigneurie also observes in other work. He writes that, "through their use of the standing-by-the-ruins topos, Lebanese writers and filmmakers translate the tradition of longing for that which is irrecoverably lost to a wartime environment."<sup>18</sup> The ruins explored throughout the docu-fiction visual substantiate Seigneurie's contention, depicting a variety of destroyed landscapes across Deneuve and Mroué's journey.

---

18. Ibid.



The film's representation of the ruin is best collected from two instances within the film. The first comes when Mroué and Deneuve journey to southern Lebanon to visit his birthplace and hometown, during which Mroué confesses, "I feel like a tourist in my own country."<sup>19</sup> Mroué's reflection stems from his distance from the place of his upbringing which is further accentuated through his inability to find and recognize his grandmother's house and the neighborhood he was brought up in. More specifically, Mroué's place within the *atlal* is discerned through his inability to return to the memories needed to complete his identity and his history because their foundations have been irreconcilably damaged by the war. Mroué's personal ties to the film immediately make the state of the present a very real and traumatic phenomenon. His perspective, thus, lends the film and Deneuve's presence a means of problematizing and confronting the stasis of the present as they dig through the ruins that once were his home.

In another of his personal reflections, Mroué describes Beirut as "a dismantled monster that can no longer move, a body decaying far from the eyes of people...In a short time, the town will rest underwater, silent, mute. And we have already begun to forget it."<sup>20</sup> Mroué's reconsideration of his own memories, experiences, and nostalgia casts an eerie shadow across the the perpetual cycle of construction/deconstruction evoked through the film's contrast of past and present that recalls the duality of night and day in Guionnet's *crépusculaire*. Mroué identifies a Lebanon that is sinking into the uncertainty between both poles, one threatened with a looming amnesia made discernible through Deneuve's interpretation and experience of the same locations across their journey. *Je Veux Voir* considers the uncertainty that rests between past and present,

---

19. *Je Veux Voir*, directed by Jonana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (2008; Beirut: MC Distribution, 2008), DVD.

20. Ibid.

waking and sleeping, and foregrounds its confrontation with Beirut and Lebanon as the *atlatl* through its direct contact with culture through a foreign lens.

## VEILS

Salhab's (*Posthumous*), a multi-diegetically constructed video piece, envisions the aftermath of the Israeli bombing in the 2006 war, and engages with the site of ruin through obscured images which are overlaid through the filmmaker's use of juxtaposition. In "After-effects," an analysis of the video's visual, auditory, and cultural significance, Peter Limbrick writes that the film "suggests a different model of the image that both clarifies and obscures: the palimpsest. Here the video image is not something that clearly presents but something whose layers obscure even as they reveal, their transparency offering porosity and combination rather than density and substitution."<sup>21</sup> The interpretation of the image as an obscuring device embodies the theme of uncertainty when one considers Salhab's layered text as a meditation on trauma rather than as a means of accepting it or healing. Viewing images with no definite borders or depth forces one to engage with the lingering effects of the war and the nostalgia for images and memories that begin to bind them together.

Saree Makdisi's essay, "Beirut/*Beirut*" considers the reconstruction of Beirut's city center by the company Solidere as an attempt to efface the city's war-induced trauma and return it to its golden age. In his writing, Sakdisi sees "the process of transformation taking place, as the shells of old buildings are gutted and rebuilt from the inside out.... In all these cases, the old look and feel has been 'preserved' essentially by having been destroyed and reinvented, purged of its

---

21. Peter Limbrick, "After-effects," *Society and Space - Environment and Planning D*. 2014. <http://societyandspace.com/material/discussion-forum/militarism-a-mini-forum/after-effects/>

22. Makdisi, Saree, "Beirut/Beirut," 35.

undesirable content and resurrected as pure form, pure image.<sup>22</sup> The contrast of Salhab's porous images and Solidere's pure form/image, illuminated in Makdisi's text, engages with the visual ambiguity throughout (*Posthumous*). Both Makdisi's text and Salhab's film problematize the delineation of a totalized duality of night and day and past and present as they are instilled by the pure image and instead work to emphasize the porous image that rests between them. Salhab's complex visualization of Beirut, when considered through the thematic context of the *atlal*, depicts Beirut's state of uncertainty at the hands of the war by engaging less with nostalgia and more with amnesia, which is visually manifested through the filmmaker's use of overlays to obscure rather than reveal, to question rather than answer. Salhab's piece aims to confront the fate of Beirut through its obscuring of a defined "pure" image, and its representation of ruins further excavates and problematizes the totaling images seeking to gloss over them.

Cherri's manipulation of the cityscape in his video *Un Cercle Autour du Soleil* also uses multi-layered images as a means of reflecting on damages from the war. Alongside his own narration that engages with personal experiences of the war, Cherri constructs a collage of buildings layered atop each other to complicate a definite image of Beirut, and instead, manipulate it to fit and better represent his memories of the city during the war. The film's narration meditates on the artist's sensibility of his body and past which are visually translated through the collage of bullet-riddled and destroyed buildings unveiled through the film's fatigued cadence.

The video begins with an establishing shot of the contours of Beirut's skyline silhouetted against the vibrant red glow of sunset. The following shot presents a centered long shot of the

---

moon enshrouded against a backdrop of dark sky. Cherri's choice to begin his video in the liminal phase of sunset allows him to visualize uncertainty, much like Guiomar's initial contrast of a conceptual and natural sunlight. For Cherri, memories of the war occupy the moments of ambiguity between the last lingering rays of light and complete darkness. The video's narration presents the artist's memories and emotional trauma as a result of the war: "I was disappointed the day they announced the war had ended. I used to be elated by the idea of living in a city that was eating itself. Like excess stomach fluid that digests and gradually eats away the stomach."<sup>23</sup> Cherri visually represents his trauma through a disorienting collage of buildings, intercut with images of irreparable damage that manipulate and fold the city over itself. Cherri's work, in the context of Sperl's consideration of the *atlal*, takes on an obscured form, governed by images inset within themselves—ruins that surround the artist externally and have an equally damaging effect internally. The video's final moments show the screen as it returns to a frame of complete darkness save for a blurred moon. The shot is eventually overlaid with text, spoken by the artist, that contends: "when at every moment one's gaze is returned there is no time to express things in words...the only reality that stares back at you is death."<sup>24</sup>

Cherri's meditation on Beirut and his comparison of ruins to his own body has an anthropomorphic effect on the images he constructs of the city, much like Mroué's descriptions of a dismantled monster. Here, Cherri's body suffers internally what the war destroyed around it, and, thus, also bears likeness to Khalil's role in *The Last Man*. That is, Khalil's deterioration coincides with the ever-darkening cityscape that surrounds him and, in the same way, accentuates

---

23. *Un Cercle Autour du Soleil*, directed by Ali Cherri (2005; Beirut: De Amsterdamse School, 2005), DVD.

24. Ibid.

the state of ruins described within Cherri's body as his manipulations of Beirut are gradually enshrouded in darkness. The transition that occurs across both films between sunrise and sunset presents death as the only certainty, the only inevitability, and is represented/experienced through the decay of the body.

The works analyzed above engage with the ambiguity and incertitude resting between the marked dualities of night and day and past and present. An evolution rests at the core of *le crépusculaire*'s confrontation of Ruins as a meeting point of loss, fate, amnesia, and death. In focusing on the blurred, forgotten, and latent themes felt in the after-effects of the war, these artists engage with a cultural, historical and memory-related trauma.

~LE DOUBLE AFFECTIF~

For Guiomar, the concept of “*le double affectif*” represents the influence that both poles of a duality have on each other through the act of substitution. Literally translated as “the emotional double,” this term, which he uses as a section heading in the part of his essay he describes as metaphysical, allows Guiomar to focus on the interaction between death and the afterlife across various works of art. His motive for exploring this particular opposition, as well as the significance of its place within his metaphysical category, can be gleaned from his description of the opposition as “le remplacement d’un être par un autre...une sympathie par laquelle un être se reconnaît passagèrement en un autre sans antagonisme ni interprétation hallucinatoire” (*PM*, 294).<sup>25</sup> Here, Guiomar establishes the notion of correspondence between death and the afterlife through a reading of substitution as a means of identifying the influence each has on the other. The naming of this section as metaphysical, as opposed to the others before it, comes from the correspondence of both poles within the dualities Guiomar explores through his analyses. That is to say that rather than the poles of the dualities explored through the work of this section being perpetually separate—as in “Le Funèbre” and “Le Crépusculaire,” where the manifestation of death rested between life and death and night and day, respectively—here they interact with, engage, and influence each other. This characterization is embodied in the author’s analysis of Salvador Dali’s *Crucifixion*, a painting portraying the figure of Christ nailed to the cross seen above the world from a high angle. Guiomar points to the marked

---

25. Trans. “the replacement of one entity by another...a sympathy through which an entity recognizes itself momentarily in another without antagonism or hallucinatory interpretation.”

contrast between the darkness surrounding Christ in the upper part of the frame and the luminosity of the natural landscape below him and suggests that it represents the dualism between the Earth and the afterlife. The painting is most notable, Guiomar argues, for Dali's unique placement of Christ apart from the world rather than being represented within it, as is common in most paintings depicting his likeness. This distinction draws a connection between both realms through the viewer's eyes and allows him/her to fill the gap with his/her interpretation.

In this section, I consider interactions similar to the one that Guiomar identifies between death and the hereafter through work by Hadjithomas and Joreige, Akram Zaatari, Lamia Joreige, and Walid Raad that revolves around the photograph. The use of photography in the films and installation work of these artists, I argue, manifests a duality between reality and the photograph that, like Guiomar's consideration of *Crucifixion* is open to interpretation by the viewer. Like my examination of the ambiguity in the phase between dualities in *le crépusculaire*, my aim here is to consider questions of authenticity, historicity and trauma through manipulations of the image.

## STILL

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's installation *Wonder Beirut: The Novel of a Pyromaniac Photographer* exhibits the work of a photographer who, with his father, in 1969, was commissioned by the State to create a calendar and postcards depicting Beirut. After a decade passed, the war and his father's death along with it, the photographer burned and manipulated the postcards he had created to better fit his experiences and feelings of Beirut. In *Tayyib Rah Farjîk Shighlî (OK, I'll Show You My Work)*, an interview about the exhibition and its conception, the artists describe their participation as "a reaction to the penury of images of the

present; a reflection on the representations of Beirut and of ourselves; and a fight against the recycling, the mythicizing of the standard images...we play at exposing Beirut, showing a part of what is supposed to be 'the authentic Beirut.'"<sup>26</sup> In the duo's assessment of their installation, the photographer's manipulation of his own postcards reinforces a contrast between the image of Beirut as the rest of the world saw it and that which its inhabitants saw/knew/experienced. Within this opposition, the decade separating the originals from their defaced counterparts enshrouds an ambiguous cultural and personal moment wherein any image of an "authentic Beirut" was problematized and muddled with the onslaught of civil war and its lingering traumas. In exploring the role of the photograph to its place at this historic fault line, I use Roland Barthes's postulations on the image in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* for their consideration of the effects of manipulation. There, Barthes contends that "since the Photograph is pure contingency and can be nothing else (it is always *something* that is represented)—contrary to the text which, by sudden action of a single word, can shift a sentence from description to reflection—it immediately yields up those 'details' which constitute the very raw material of ethnological knowledge."<sup>27</sup> Here, Barthes considers photography as inextricably bound to a referent and evaluates the effects of manipulation on its reflective capacity. I argue, in the context of his contentions, that when photographs are distorted or doctored, as in Hadjithomas and Joreige's *Wonder Beirut*, they can offer a personal reflection. With the effects of manipulation in mind, the postcards of the artists' exhibition demonstrate an underlying contrast between actuality and subjective experience, in light of how manipulation can drastically effect the indexical qualities of images and their personal significance. Barthes makes

---

26. Hadjithomas et al., *Tayyin Rah Farjik Shighli*, 91.

27. Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, 28. (hereafter cited in text as *CL*).



this distinction specifically with respect to the written word, but I contend that the pyromaniacal renderings of *Wonder Beirut*'s photographer transcend the descriptive limitations of the photograph and offer nostalgic and pensive reflections into cultural and personal history. Rather than being mutually exclusive, as in Barthes's contention, the doctored photographs in Hadjithomas and Joreige's exhibit represent a coalescence of description and reflection, joined in the act of manipulation, and indicative of a more "authentic" visioning of Beirut. The blurring of these contradistinctions is evident in an interview with the artists in which they state: "Our questioning of the city has called into question the power of the image. One had sometimes to be more explicit, give the image anew an aura, consider it a site of work, of life. During the exhibition, the visitor entertains few frontal relations with the photographs: it is a matter of turning, touching, moving, seeing oneself, dismembering."<sup>28</sup> Here, the interaction of visitors with the exhibition's photographs substantiates the effect of manipulation to distance the image from its original referent and move it towards a more personal, subjective truth through the process of "turning, touching, [and] moving" it. Thus, the power of manipulation is accentuated within the parallel of photograph and reality, wherein one draws attention to the other.

In light of the coalescence harnessed within this opposition, I turn to another manipulation of images in Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad's collaborative effort, *Mapping Sitting*. In this exhibition, the collaborators selected and organized a vast array of images from the Arab Image Foundation's archives and categorized them accordingly by four classifications of recurrent themes they identified in the photographs they amassed: identity, group, itinerant, and surprise. Each of these categories, and the photographs placed within them, revolve around

---

28. Hadjithomas et al., *Tayyin Rah Farjik Shighli*, 91-2.

photographs of people and their bodies. Here, as in the previous sections, the work contextualizes its affective capacity through the body. For these artists, the body represents a fundamental mode of translating major themes and the intricacies of their work's project. In Zaatari and Raad's installation, the sprawl of unidentified faces (in identification documents, group photos, posed stills, and candid shots) prompts an inquiry into the origins of the photographs. The lack of verification of the images and their organization and placement within the exhibition produces an immediate personal connection that stems from this act of looking without having access to names or other identifying elements and substituting them with one's own. Thus, the disassociation of names, places, dates (listed only later as references in the index/register of the book) leads the eye to examine the facial and corporeal qualities of each photograph. Further, when we consider Guiomar's concept of "substitution", we can see how such a presentation bridges the gap between the original image and the viewer's interpretation of it.

Another of Barthes's notions sheds light on this phenomenon. In the outset of his text, faced with the inability to classify photography, the first connection the author makes is to his own body: "what the Photograph reproduces to infinity has only occurred once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see..." (*CL*, 4). The unidentified faces and bodies of the photographed become a vessel occupied by the viewer, into which they might place their desires, needs, insecurities. The issue of authenticity resulting from the unidentified photographs leads me to the final category of the exhibition — "surprise."

Here, a massive collage of photographs results in an indistinct, blurred, and decontextualized image that envelops the frame. The series of photographs that constitute the collage are then separated into individual photographs foregrounded against the collectivity they contributed to. The notion of “surprise” and its purpose in the exhibition can be illuminated in another of Barthes’s contentions, when he states that “the photographic ‘shock’ ... consists less in traumatizing than in revealing what was so well hidden that the actor himself was unaware or unconscious of it” (*CL*, 32). In this sense, the unveiling of latent images through the eyes of the viewer draws out even the most minute of details of each photograph and its piece in the larger visual collectivity, and in doing so, one is reminded of the Benjaminian sensibility of flashes of the past resurfacing. In this vein, each photograph emerges individually from within this collectivity and then sinks back in to allow another to be revealed, allowing viewers to focus and find, as Barthes puts it, the corpus they need.

These “surprise” photographs, finding their origins in arbitrariness, offer a means of engaging with the exhibit as a whole. Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari describe the work in their essay, “Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed,” wherein they write, “more than operating according to simplistic binary oppositions such as truth or falsehood, history or memory, public or private, *Mapping Sitting* functions simultaneously as both and neither in order to question how narratives themselves are organized, transmitted, and legitimated.”<sup>29</sup> The ambiguity evoked from the exhibit, as expressed in Feldman and Zaatari’s excerpt, questions the authenticity and historicity of the photographs and their organization. Consequently, these questions shed light on an opposition ubiquitous throughout the work

---

29. Feldman et al., “Mining War,” 57.

between the original indexical or referential quality of the photographs and their subsequent manipulations through the organization of the exhibit. Much like *Wonder Beirut*, but through organizational manipulation rather than physical doctoring, *Mapping Sitting* concretizes the power of the photograph to transcend the descriptive and simultaneously offer reflection. In Zaatari and Raad's work, this reflection is manifested through the arbitrariness, the surprise of the unidentified, of having viewers project their own interpretations or experiences in the place of names or factual evidence.

### **LATENT IMAGES**

The photograph finds a pivotal place in Lamia Joreige's film, *A Journey*, in which Joreige chronicles her family's history and experiences in Lebanon to gain perspective on the effects of the war from the spectrums of past and present. Throughout the film, Joreige uses archival photographs and documents provided by her aunt, Tati Rose, the subject of the film, to make clear her intention to delve into the past in order to elucidate the present. The film uses the photograph in conjunction with moving images, making them function to form a cadence that endures throughout the piece. Joreige undergoes two journeys throughout the film, one through her family's ties to Beirut and the other in the film's present, as she makes her way down towards the Israeli border. Both progressions gradually ease together, becoming more entangled the closer she gets to the border, and lend the photographs a rhythm that is used to translate this evolution across the film.

The presence of the image lends an authenticity to the film that is manifested through Tati Rose's physical presence in the present as well as in the photographs Joreige uses to revisit the past. An elderly Tati Rose sits beside the filmmaker as she traces back through her photo album

and, in the same shot sees a younger, blooming version of herself standing beside her parents, then, on another page, herself with her children... The most authentic aspect of the film comes from the fact that Tati Rose's experiences have visual traces, presented, if not curated, by the filmmaker to revisit moments buried in Tati Rose's memory. The latent quality of these images inspire the film's retrospection and, as a result, they confront the war from both past and present. The traumatic nature of the war and its toll on the memories of those who endured it motivate the return to past images of Beirut. Joreige's journey confronts the destruction of the city, and in light of such drawbacks, returns to images preceding the destruction to examine the extent to which the war changed and effected the present. When the civil war and more recent acts of violence are considered through Benjamin's notion of "moments of danger," Joreige's role as an archivist of her lineage presents her as a historical materialist. In this regard, the photograph becomes the flash of the past that Joreige works to preserve and embrace in order to elucidate what is at risk of being forgotten.

The film's confrontation with repressed truth can be summed up through one image in particular. Throughout the film the ocean serves as a reference point for Joreige's progress on her southern-bound trek. For the majority of the piece the shots of the ocean are in motion, another aspect which lends an overall cadence to the evolution the video, until the end, when the filmmaker and her retrospection meet their destination. The final shot of the ocean is static, itself a photograph, which emphasizes the pivotal hold of the photograph in respect to the authenticity and historicity of the past, but its presence in the future leaves further questions open-ended. The representation of the past within the film (via documents, images, memorabilia) allows for a summation of its effect on the present. The future, however, having few referents in the present,

due to destruction and loss to the latent ramifications of war, remains open-ended. Here, the film's retrospection also elucidates the fact that the journey it endures is an ongoing one, and that the film itself is a document, a record of the present for the future. Thus, in keeping with Guionmar's framing of an underlying duality, the interaction between reality and the image in Joreige's film engenders an exploration of actuality against memory. That is to say, actuality and memory exist within the same moment and through the film's display of the destruction war can have on reality, memory becomes a force of substitution. Memory, in the film, replaces and fills in the missing pieces in order to re-constitute a socially, culturally and historically authentic representation of Beirut. The same re-constitution is reimagined in the work of Walid Raad, who uses fiction to complicate the relationship of actuality with the present.

In *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*, a project by The Atlas Group and Raad, manipulations of photographs, video and information aim to challenge and problematize historicity in regards to cultural and social trauma. In section of the project entitled, *Secrets of the Open*, the group presents 29 photographic prints they found buried in the rubble of the 1992 demolition of Beirut's commercial district after the war's end. Each of the images was a distinct shade of blue, but upon being sent to laboratories for analysis, were revealed to have latent images beneath. The photographs included photos of men and women who would all be identified as having died either from drowning, or being found dead, in the Mediterranean between 1975 and 1991.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike *A Journey*, *Secrets of the Open Sea* confronts authenticity and historicity through a functioning of fictional and documented narratives that problematize the relationship between

---

30. Raad, Walid, *Scratching on Things*, 107-8.

actuality and memory. Through entwining fictionalized and documented occurrences, the project forces the viewer to engage with the ambiguity resulting from cultural amnesia and traumas such as death, injury and war. Here, the fictionalizing of actual events, such as the war, can be analyzed in the context of Benjamin's notion of the necessity of preserving the flashes of the past as they arise from the less-remembered moments of history. Raad and the Atlas Group work to question the effects of substituting a flash of an actual historical occurrence for a fabricated moment in history. Does the substitution of a historical event for a subjective re-imagining of it affect the authenticity or relevance of such a moment? I argue, as I did in my analyses of *Wonder Beirut* and *Mapping Sitting*, that the lack of verifiable information regarding the moment in question is authenticated by the viewer supplanting his own experience where the original image or information is lacking. Thus, the manipulation of photographs and of information in this work initiates an interaction between the viewer and the emotional, personal, and cultural effects trauma suffered through the war and its effects on history and memory. Barthes engages with this phenomenon through his notion of the photograph as a meeting point of oppositions. In this context, he writes that the photograph's existence is "derived from the co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they do not belong to the same world" (CL, 23). Here, the ambiguity that rests between fact and fiction—as well as other dualities examined throughout this section—is manifested through the photograph's capacity in joining two distinct and independent elements. Thus, the manipulation of photography and information affects the indexical qualities of the work itself through their organization and classification, and enables the co-existence of two contrasting forces.

By examining the photograph through Guiomar's frame of an underlying duality of life and afterlife, the role of manipulation is revealed as what foregrounds the photograph's capacity for provoking reflection through description. Thus, manipulation functions as a means of problematizing and re-configuring the limits of contingency (Barthes). Each of the artists' works embodies this capacity in a different way, and in doing so, each exemplifies the variety of forms and functionalities the photograph can occupy and represent.



## CONCLUSION

After characterizing death and its manifestations across these works, the significance of the analyses within this thesis can be restated. These artists, in their portrayal and engagement with trauma, dare to pose questions that they know have no definite answers. Through their work, they confront the postwar period of Beirut and Lebanon in cultural, historical, and personal contexts, using their respective mediums as a means of working out their own wounds. The representation of death as discussed in this thesis has laid the groundwork through which the works can be contextualized as relevant to temporal, social, and global concerns that go beyond Lebanon.

Paul Willemsen's "The National Revisited" identifies Bakhtin's notion of *exotopy*, or "double-outsidedness" as a key proponent in approaching work from a distance. Here, the observer must maintain an understanding of his own culture while immersed in another. He must be aware of the distance between himself and the work and use it to effect a change in his own outlook and in his interaction of the work. My attempt to do so has been to analyze individual works in relation to a collective body of work to which they contribute. This approach has allowed for a comprehensive view and experience with a culture that still endures the traumatic aftereffects of war. Thus, when I consider Bakhtin's notions of otherness in the section "Le Funèbre," I am also considering my own distance from the work and the cultural situation it represents. Much like my experience with Cherri's *Un Cercle Autour du Soleil*, I search for trauma that is made readily available by the artists, tangible by foreigners. My distance has thus allowed me to be immersed in the work of these artists and, consequently, has preoccupied me

with the stake of the country's history and the violence it has and is still experiencing. It is, however, in the gap between myself and Lebanon that I must remain, considering what I have learned throughout this process as an insight I can take with me in furthering my own experiences with personal trauma.

In these final thoughts, I can only aspire to share the significance of these works in the context of their own culture. The most powerful role of these works is their capacity to represent the ambiguous state that occupies Lebanon, and more specifically, Beirut. From these manifestations of the cultural, social, and personal traumas of the war's after-math comes the imprint of a progressive and distinct movement towards the future. The works have taken the initial step towards engaging and confronting trauma that would otherwise go unburied. The country's art, in this sense, has tried to begin healing and accepting the nation's ambiguous state in order to move forward. That is, through the representation of characters and historical moments or manipulations of history through doctored photographs, the artists are exposing the current stasis that envelops the country. Like in Benjamin's thinking, the preservation of the past through moments of danger is equally as important for the present. In order to move forward, the country must come to terms with its past.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakhtin, M. M. "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity." In *Art and Answerability*, edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, 4-256. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981.
- Bassil, Karl, Zeina Maasri, Akram Za'atari and Walid Raad. *Mapping Sitting*. Beirut: Mind the Gap/Arab Image Foundation, 2005.
- Feldman, Hannah and Akram Zaatari. "Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed." *Art Journal* 66, no. 2: 48-67.
- Guiomar, Michel. *Principes d'une Esthétique de la Mort*. Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1967.
- Hadjithomas, Joana, Khalil Joreige and Jalal Tufiq. "Tayyin Rah Farjik Shighli (OK, I'll Show You My Work)" *Discourse* 24, no. 1 (2002): 85-98.
- Limbrick, Peter. "After-Effects." *Society and Space - Environment and Planning D*, accessed June 10, 2014. <http://societyandspace.com/material/discussion-forum/militarism-a-miniforumaftereffects>
- Makdisi, Saree. "Beirut/Beirut." In *TAMÁSS: Contemporary Arab Representations*, edited by Catherine David and translated by Walid Sadek, 26-40. Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002.
- Raad, Walid. *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2007.
- Sadek, Walid. "Laissez-Passer." In *TAMÁSS: Contemporary Arab Representations*, edited by Catherine David and translated by Walid Sadek, 15-19. Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002.
- Seigneurie, Ken. *Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011.

Sperl, Stefan. *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry: A Structural Analysis of Selected Texts (3rd Century AH/9th Century AD - 5th Century AH/11th Century AD)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Toufic, Jalal. *Vampires, an Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*. New York: Station Hill, 1993.

Walter, Benjamin. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 253-264. New York: Schocken, 1968.

Westmoreland, Mark Ryan. "Crisis of Representation: Experimental Documentary in Postwar Lebanon." Dissertation, Austin, Tex.: University of Texas, 2008.

#### FILMOGRAPHY

*A Perfect Day*. Directed by Jonana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. Beirut: About Productions, 2005. DVD.

*Beirut Phantom*. Directed by Ghassan Salhab. Beirut: Epicentre Films, 1998. DVD.

*The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*. Directed by Walid Raad. Beirut: Video Data Bank, 1999. DVD.

*Je Veux Voir*. Directed by Jonana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. Beirut: MC Distribution, 2008. DVD.

*The Last Man*. Directed by Ghassan Salhab. Beirut: Agat Films Cie, 2006. DVD.

*Ma Souffrance est Réelle*. Directed by Ali Cherri. Beirut: De Amsterdamse School, 2005. DVD.

*(PostHumous)*. Directed by Ghassan Salhab. Beirut: Video Data Bank, 2007. DVD.

*Un Cercle Autour du Soleil*. Directed by Ali Cherri. Beirut: De Amsterdamse School, 2005. DVD.

*Un Voyage*. Directed by Lamia Joreige. Beirut: Centre National des Arts Plastiques, 2006. DVD