

Peddling Time When Standing Still; art remains in Lebanon and the globalization that was

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Already in 2001, at a time when the work of post-Ta'if (1) Lebanese artists was being shown worldwide, it was possible to remark that the aftermath of civil-war can raise a few chosen individuals onto the stage of globalization just as it can level the lives of many others into an uncertain and cold existence. (2) Acquiring the label of post-civil war artist seemed like a dependable means by which to graduate from the position of a survivor to the privileged position of a reliable witness who stands astride the wreckage and addresses the world. No longer part of the wreckage or governed by the extended and damaged time of a civil-war, such an artist gladly appropriates the responsibility of speaking for others and accordingly enters the coveted circuit of international exhibitions and biennales. Such artists, it must be said, did not betray the war they lived or accompanied nor should they be faulted for venality. Rather, they performed what was probably unavoidable: to provide an accessible inventory for a convoluted war at a time when a return to the world of normality seemed possible for the Lebanese. Throughout the 1990's various artworks, films and plays with widely divergent aesthetics and discourses found attentive international audiences and landed extended passes into a global art circuit. The tense and lingering interface provoked in Beirut between the play *Mudhakkarat Ayyub* (Memories of Job) 1993, (3) which insists on interrogating post-war conditions through the mirror of past but still accessible social struggles and the lengthily entitled *Udkhul Ya Sayyidee Innana Nantaziruka Fil Kharrej* (Step in Sir, We Are Waiting for you Outside) (1998), (4) in which images of the past devoid of symbolic weight flit on screens, is totally lost when both are shown abroad. The same applies, in more obvious terms, to the film *Beyrouth Fantôme* (1998), (5) which grapples with the absences that dwell in civil-war survivors and *West Beirut* (1998), (6) which weaves a light fable that washes the savagery away from the recent past presenting heroes as amiable outcasts in a

war that seems to have happened long ago to folks who may resemble our parents. By 2003, one could speak of an inflation concerning contemporary Lebanese art whereby an increased international visibility found little impact locally. The contradictions were conspicuous. Lebanese art was marking the calendar of the international art circuit at a time when the socio-political situation in the country was regressing alarmingly. Artists, it seemed, could do nothing else except continue their careers. Said more bluntly, they carried on the trend of addressing and divulging to an international audience. It was during that same year upon the publication of author and artist Bilal Khbeiz's collection of essays entitled *Globalization and the Manufacture of Transient Events* (7) that the actual stakes of such a trend towards divulgement were clearly articulated. In a section entitled "Events that do not Happen", (8) Khbeiz remarks that globalization comes unstoppable following the expropriation of latency from all entities which could claim a dual constitution, latent and manifest. Not only nature or the psyche but also the body is made to depart from the pithy depth of its organs and float unhindered on specular skins. By the time globalization is fully operative, two separate and unequal courses are set: "First is that of the image, where events accumulate but never occur and second is the course of the real where events occur only to vanish without a trace." (9) Access to the first course would require each applicant to become a set of performed attributes, a discursive persona, which can "claim skill without necessarily being skillful, just as our virtual interlocutor accepts our claims on the basis of argumentation alone. The mechanisms of globalization [...] make us into speakers and, at best, recognized actors; for it is actors who are globalization's first citizens." (10) The words of Khbeiz, hyperbolic as one might argue, formed a strong cautionary remark to artists who, even if following the best intentions, should realize that divulgement before a global audience does not amount to a confession. For the latter can still intimate an ability to harbor secrets and a desire not to tell whereas divulgement is an act of surfacing, of floating atop and away from any attachment with the unspoken. Lebanese artists were accordingly in danger of performing the civil war and of producing works which mimic strife rather than works which intimate the determining conditions of living a protracted war. Serious artists who began working in the early 1990's and continue still have struggled repeatedly with this difficulty. A notable instance is Rabih Mroué, an artist as intelligent as he is prolific, who in a recent performance entitled *How Nancy*

Wished that Everything Was an April Fool's Joke, seems to watch from an amused distance the full chronology of a civil-war organized into a series of clearly connected, even if ironic or absurd, episodes. (11) If post-Ta'if Lebanese artists continue to negotiate in their disparate ways a role and a presence within international art circuits and persist, at times, in concocting cunning strategies with which to elude the requisite divulgement, it is nevertheless arguable that they are pursuing their careers on borrowed time. The local and regional conditions which had propelled these artists into the circuits of a global art market came tumbling down following the assassination of former prime minister Rafic Hariri on the 14th of February 2005 and then later during and after the attempted Israeli annihilation of Hizb Allah in Lebanon in summer of 2006: first, the centrality of the capital Beirut, which stood as their ostensible referent and which nourished their critiques and claims, was severely undone. Second, the *pax* Hariri which had maintained the myth of an economic growth during the 1990's by brokering a tense but operative truce with the military force of Hizb Allah in south Lebanon and by placating with every means possible the demands of the Syrian Ba'th regime was annulled. (12) Even if the global art market, ever eager for information and events, continues to host the work of Lebanese artists, it is nevertheless crucial to state that it does so against a very different background. When traveling now, Lebanese artists do so with a local landslide not far behind. Their peregrinations are decelerated by a land awash in violent geopolitical struggles, a land un-fixed by crisis. In the least, these artists have to grapple with the thickness of a land in disarray, of places they can no longer own as an amenable referent to their work nor disavow and without which pursue their careers; damaged places tugging at their sleeves, forsaken without an operative temporality. For as the local and regional powers vie to define the time of the nation regardless of actual costs incurred by inhabited places, it remains to be seen if artists, among others, will resist the sundering of time and place and propose, against all odds, a habitable chronotope.

Now is the time

When on the evening of Sunday the 16th of July 2006 the secretary general of Hizb Allah, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, appeared on television to address the Lebanese for the second time since the beginning of the Israeli war against Lebanon, he chose to end his speech in unequivocal

terms: “We willing or not, whether the Lebanese are willing or not, Lebanon now and the resistance in Lebanon are engaged in the battle of the Umma.”(13) With these words, the secretary general came to fix the time of the nation in the present tense. Lebanon, and all those in it, will be in the *now* until further notice. Thereupon, it seemed as if we were forcibly expelled from sequential time and made to enter the domain of one particular temporality, that of a prolonged *now*, defined by extreme proximity and imminence. Bracketed, Nasrallah’s statement could be read as none more than imperious wording spoken in a situation of extreme urgency. Yet, when contextualized within local and regional politics, it emerges as a rebuttal and carries hence an alternative conception of temporality than that dominant in Lebanon since the assassination of former prime minister Rafic Hariri on the 14th of February 2005. In struggling to overshadow one another, these two conceptions of national time mark an exacerbation of strife in Lebanon. Hizb Allah, leading a coalition of parties opposed to Hariri’s Future Movement, labors to fix the identity of the Lebanese nation, and not the state, through its leading Shi’i model of armed resistance to Israeli military expansionism and its concomitant American imperialism. While the Sunni Future Movement, claims to represent a Lebanese democratic forefront of a pan-Arab identity born out of its resistance to a dictatorial Syrian Ba’th regime. Important to add is that for Lebanese Sunnis, this resistance only begins with the assassination of Rafic Hariri and includes, merely courteously, preceding practices of resistance, convoluted and often contradictory, to the Syrian regime by various Christian and Druze militias and political parties.(14)

Killing time

At the Quntari crossroad in Beirut, a prominent LED day-counter sits perched on a billboard showing a large portrait of Rafic Hariri coupled with the slogan *Al Haqeeqa Li Ajl Loubnan* (or The truth for Lebanon’s Sake). The lit red digits mark the number of days passing since the assassination of the former prime minister. With day zero falling on the 14th of February 2005, the counter has duly exceeded 1300. The cluster of portrait, slogan and counter has become for the Future Movement and its allies the marker of a messianic wait initiated by the tragic assassination and promised deliverance by the International Tribunal to be held in the

Netherlands following on more than 3 years of investigative work by the International Independent Investigation Commission (IIIC) set up by the UN through security council resolution 1595 on the 7th of April 2005. Between day zero and day one, namely the announcement of a conclusive verdict by the tribunal, stretches a duration of insignificance. The digits of the day-counter mark an increasing number but in fact signify a countdown. The assassination of Hariri promises a beginning, logistically delayed, which will eventually release the nation and the state from 30 years of assassinations left unpunished. Such, at least, is the purport of the political discourse maintained by the Future Movement. For a believer and ally, a close scrutiny of the many preceding assassinations which have punctuated the lengthy civil-war is certainly undesired. For not even a simpleton can be convinced that the assassination of a suppressive and authoritarian right-wing leader such as Bashir Gemayel (15) can be made to stream along that of Kamal Junblat, leader of the PLO-backed Lebanese National movement,(16) or, for that matter, that of Elie Hobeika, a double-agent suspected of having carried out massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla in Beirut.(17) Yet in necessarily discounting such a concern for historical precision, the political discourse of the Future Movement does once again what every confessional and sectarian faction has previously done and is willing to do yet again: to rewrite the history of the nation through its own founding moment. (18) The assassination of Hariri is promoted as the penultimate moment of a foreseen beginning understood both as an *initium* - a springing forth – and as an *epiphania* - an event that requires of the beholder a complete surrender to the augury made manifest. Accordingly, the violent past which will finally come to an end through the assassination or rather martyrdom of Hariri is simultaneously summoned and purged. Historical precision aside, what matters is the wait, in itself the expression of a resounding identification with this calendar of a day zero, a day one and the killing of time in between.

Battling for the underfoot of time

The two opposing conceptions of temporality upheld by Hizb Allah and the Future Movement share nevertheless an aim for suspending the development of variant courses taken by individual lives and for deprecating alternative paths drawn by various social actors. (19) Whether the

exhortation is to wait for deliverance or remain indefinitely mobilized against the likely incursions of the Israeli enemy, individuals living in Lebanon were exposed to the realization that they were subsisting in a time they could no longer claim as theirs. In a text written following the assassination of Hariri, Bilal Khbeiz elaborates on the first stages of this predicament: “Upon that event, the inhabitants of the city entered a time not their own, [...] a public time that set their waking hour to the clock of the world and lit their mornings with the exploding flash-bulbs of a million cameras. Now they live, these inhabitants, dragging what remains of their disparate futures behind what has already come to pass. Inducted into public time, they saw their many temporalities suspended. For when the unforeseeable occurs, time can no longer be claimed as one’s own.” (20) Khbeiz articulates the first consequences of the assassination. In the months that followed, this public time which he describes, rather counter-intuitively, as a time which expropriates all that is singular in the life of an individual,(21) would gradually cede to the pernicious admonishments of the wait. The shock of the assassination and the clamour which ensued could not be sustained. In order to inhibit the encroachment of the quotidian, time had to be colonized and revalued. The Future Movement and its allies were faced with performing the impossible: block any event that might divert the attention of the populace. Setting up the eventual verdict of the International Tribunal as the telos towards which all other events, including the many assassinations which followed that of Rafic Hariri, converge, sanctioned a monopoly for the Future Movement on defining the temporality of the nation. When the Israeli attempted invasion of Lebanon began on the 12th of July 2006, Hizb Allah and its allies were finally allowed a chance to manoeuvre and then vigorously propose another temporality for the nation. Nasrallah’s televised speech did more than mobilize the Lebanese against the invasion underway. It declared another dominant temporality, one of imminence, which signals an end to the messianic wait for truth and in its stead deployed an ever-readiness against the visible and knowable enemy. The implementation of a ceasefire brokered by the United Nations on the 14th of August followed by the lifting of the Israeli naval blockade on the 8th of September as well as the deployment of the Lebanese army to the South starting on the 17th of August backed by an enlarged UNIFIL force counting 13,225 troops as established under UN resolution 1701 on the 11th of August, are all factors which may have since mitigated the urgency of Nasrallah’s declaration,

allowing the Lebanese to step back a few paces from an extreme situation. Yet the temporality he articulates in his speech remains operative and inevitably contentious opposite that of the Future Movement. The fierce fighting which broke out between the two on the 8th of May 2008 in Beirut and adjoining regions was accordingly unavoidable. The standoff between the two temporal conceptions produced such an un-generative political balance that both had to retreat and fight for the ownership of places. Rather than fold the territory under the jurisdiction of one victorious temporal conception, both projects resorted to brute force as a last attempt to break the balance. The outcome of the May clashes remains inconclusive, bloody as they were. The next round of fighting is already underway and scheduled for a second aggravated bout of violence next summer in time for parliamentary elections. In battling for places, the struggle between the two blocs remains bound and at the service of the two opposing temporal definitions. Rather than attempt to think the future of places within the bounds of the viable, Hizb Allah and the Future Movement continue to override the concerns of places and of those who in them seek a possible tomorrow. Said bluntly, places are instrumentally reduced to those who live in them as potential voters. In accordance with the political calendar, interest in tabulating votes alternates with body counts and the meretricious laments with which they are accompanied. Places, when under the exigencies of such bellicose temporal conceptions, are nothing more than the underfoot of time; trampled on the way to a putative victory.

Writing during the months following the Israeli war against Lebanon, Bilal Khbeiz proposes, in what ought to be considered an extended coda to his contributions to *File: Public Time*, a desperate defense of places and the lives they could embrace: “Lebanese civilians are faced with the unjust predicament of an enemy who seizes sea and sky and a resistance force that maneuvers underground. When engaged, the two destroy from all three sides the places upon which one could live.”(22) The degeneration of Lebanese politics which gradually led from a costly but successful resistance against the invading Israeli army to ruthless internecine fighting on the streets of Beirut seems to establish a model practiced by the Israelis as well as by local political forces, by which places are made expendable because relegated to the present understood by all as the one temporality to denigrate. Accordingly, Khbeiz’s seemingly bitter remark that “the resistance lives, it always lives because it burrows underground when death falls and surfaces

victoriously when fire ceases”, (23) is more likely an ardent protest against the slighting of places-now in the name of liberated territories to come. Yet, ardent as it is, Khbeiz’s protest leads towards an aporetic situation: was it possible for anyone to be in slighted places, such as Beirut’s southern suburbs, during the catastrophic days of July-August 2006 and survive to tell a story, to represent, and henceforth to allow for living to continue in those same devastated places? For does not the defense of ‘places-now’ fundamentally require a lucid witnessing, most likely impracticable, at the crossroad of an extreme event occurring at a particular place and a specific time? Further, can Khbeiz’s protest stand fast and regenerate a habitable chronotope critical of the instrumental sundering of time and place by dominant politico-military forces?

Survivors who knew too much

Bilal Khbeiz who writes after the summer months of 2006 and some of those who wrote after him, and do still, are survivors. So they are, Khbeiz argues, because bound to accept their survival mixed as it comes with an indelible feeling of selfishness and opportunism. For a resident of Beirut, the author argues, the event of war is experienced as two: “One vague and obscure, the other lucid and amenable for representation. The first is drowned in distress. The second is televised and allows one to lucidly see the image of destruction and gladly gather thereupon that death fell on others.” (24) Extrapolating on Khbeiz’s remark, the televised image appears as a window through which we ascertain the death of others and as a mirror in which we recognize our own survival; a bitterly selfish realization and an embarrassing opportunity bestowed. Yet what remains unclear, or rather deferred, in Khbeiz’s essay is the location of such a survivor. In other words, does such surviving apply to someone caught in one of the shelters in the devastated southern suburbs of Beirut as much as it would to others residing in one of the untargeted, even if contiguous, districts? On this particular matter Khbeiz is vague. The force of his argument is directed against journalists, humanists and other spectating activists who live abroad and who enjoy the privilege of harboring “pure sorrow for the fallen untarnished by selfish feelings which beleaguer survivors.” (25) Yet Khbeiz’s essay leads to consequences elsewhere. What he terms as selfishness and opportunism designates an ethical quandary forced on survivors, particularly those who recognize the geographical scope of a catastrophe as it happens and then choose the

relative safety of an adjacent district. During the early days of the attempted Israeli invasion of Lebanon, it became obvious that the primary target was Hizb Allah and its Shi'i constituency living in south Lebanon and in the densely populated southern suburbs of Beirut. Although other districts were hit, one could, for instance, remain in the predominantly Christian town of Hazmieh and be relatively safe even if no more than 500 meters away from the targeted and predominantly Shi'i locality of Chayyah. Many gladly made that choice and many others succumbed to an executional decision taken by the Israelis to ethnically cleanse Lebanon from all of what it disdainfully marked as Shi'itic Hizb Allah. In the case of the latter an ethical difficulty arises and lingers. The splitting of the event in two as Khbeiz argues necessitates a crucial amendment when applied to survivors residing in what were generally non-targeted areas. For if the event of the war is secondly experienced televised and provokes in the spectator a bitter sense of relief, it is firstly experienced, not in the vagueness and obscurity of distress as Khbeiz proposes, but rather lucidly even if not directly viewed. Those residing in Hazmieh, for instance, may not have stood on their balconies superciliously watching buildings collapse in Chayyah or Haret Hreik. Yet they knew through the reverberating blows they heard, that a discriminating and criminal line of fire granted them a respite they neither earned nor could openly claim. Not seeing, in their case, does not warrant lack of knowledge for hearing was already clear and plentiful. Their ears, our ears, saw all there was to be seen.

Remember, if you will, that one long scene set in besieged Sarajevo in Theo Angelopoulos' film *Ulysses' Gaze* (26) in which the main protagonist, having symbolically regained his vision following the successful development of three cinematic reels dating from the early 20th century, stands stiff in blinding fog as he clearly hears and lucidly realizes that his companions, children, coevals and elderlies, are being executed and dumped into the river by armed militias. No matter how fogbound sight can sometimes be, knowing is not necessarily equally so. Fog, for Angelopoulos, seems insufferably translucent and hearing damningly perspicacious. The line drawn by the Israelis was not the first to be drawn across Lebanese territory. We, the Lebanese, have done similarly many times before; lines which allowed blocs and factions to look upon the destruction of the other and claim victory, but also lines which turn everyone into survivors or more precisely into survivors who knew too much.

Such a survivor can neither claim nor manage a habitable chronotope, a concrete whole, to paraphrase Mikhail Bakhtin's definition, made of thickened time which charges space and turns it responsive to its movement. (27) Rather, he or she lives in a place divorced by bitter safety from an event occurring in another time which annihilates elsewhere and nearby, all places and the myriad lives they harbor. Fair to say, that Khbeiz's defense of habitable places, neither underground nor in the militarily colonized sky and sea, is indispensable in exposing the consequences of forcibly severing the temporal axis away from places now abandoned to uncertain ends.

As for those other survivors emerging from inadequate shelters to behold the radical transformation of their familiar places into rubble, their livelihoods will remain reliant on whether they and those who survived on the other side will discern and intently behold the criminal line which Israeli bombers carved between the city and its southern suburbs; a line which cannot be undone but rather is added to the many scars which etch the face of this broken nation. Beholding it is a critical, even if costly, act for it will inevitably reflect the face of he who looks and on it deposit a blemish. Yet to erase that line, as both have done in the preceding months, has led to a debilitating ideological polarization. Those who survived in targeted areas have been diligently wiping the traces in the name of a divine victory, while those survivors who knew too much have been persistently disregarding that same line in order to mitigate the weight of their moral quandary. A festering wound, the line continues to gape and is manifested in reciprocal accusations. It is equally and instrumentally used to indict the aggressor and its local proxies and to invoke and denounce the arrogant self-sufficiency and political recklessness of Hizb Allah.

In a short video work entitled *Bint Jbeil*, (28) named after a village in south Lebanon annihilated by the Israeli air-force during the war of 2006, Rania Stephan presents an elderly male survivor who, puzzlingly unable to speak, tells his story in expressive gesticulations. From behind her camera, we hear her voice attempting to translate the man's animated gestures into words before the soundtrack is abruptly muted. We then witness 15 seconds of a man alone navigating in a language fashioned by catastrophe. During the final few seconds, sound is restored and the director's voice attempts a second translation which seems to draw from the man a faint

smile of satisfaction. To close the video and the encounter, she extends her hand and shakes his. From the relative safety of her position behind the camera, the director reaches out to acknowledge a survivor who speaks in another tongue. What they share is the depth of the criminal line they do not cross but over which attempt to reach one another through inarticulate translations and a handshake. On her side she lives and on his side he lives even if not as well. What separates them is equal to what they share. (29)

Fleshing Time

The search for a habitable chronotope which could challenge or elude the predicament of living in Lebanon under the sway of two opposing and reductive conceptions of temporality, impelled but a few serious responses from practicing contemporary Lebanese artists. My interest lies primarily in two works, a performance by Rabih Mroué and more importantly a feature film by Ghassan Salhab. These two works when read together yield an intellectual space in which to think the burden one has to shoulder in attempting a return to the place of the event now passed and live in the extension of a damaged temporality. But before venturing into these two particular works, an elaboration of my understanding and use of the concept of chronotope is in order. To read Bakhtin's text entitled "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" (30) in the context of the embattled city of Beirut and its suburbs, is to be hailed first by the physical and organic vocabulary used to define the concept at the beginning and towards the end of the essay. "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused", the author argues, and time "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history." (31) Bakhtin returns in his concluding remarks, written many years later, (32) to a similar vocabulary: "Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins." (33) The unabashed use of such a vocabulary services, as is apparent in the lengthy essay, a promotion of a language, that of the novel, which resists ideological flattening. He writes: "An event can be communicated, it becomes information, one can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence. But the event does not become a figure. It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the

representability of events.” (34) Access to the event remains abstract if time is not marked by particular places, if without “the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers – the time of human life, of historical time – that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas.” (35) Bakhtin further attempts to anchor and materialize time by stating that the chronotope “emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel.” (36) What Bakhtin proposes is an aesthetic capable of providing a path which treads back to the event. The chronotope therefore has a claim on historiography as well for it proffers an indexical function even if, according to Michael Rothberg, it “points backward toward the event – thus underlining representation’s belatedness in relation to that event.” (37) In fact, I would argue, that the relevance of the chronotope lies in its belatedness, in that it claims to provide a model by which a collective history can be written after the event. In following the argument presented thus far, the organic gathering of time and place may no longer be possible. Yet, what is relevant in Bakhtin’s concept is that it allows for a model by which to gauge the crisis in which we live. For it seems that an event cannot be made into a figure without the construction of a chronotope, namely a body formed of anchored time and activated place. Considering the consequences of the political crisis in Lebanon surrounding the conception of a national time, such a chronotope is prohibited by the sheer force of the warring factions and the hegemony of their sectarian discourses over public debates. Accordingly, a provocation of a coincidence between the markers of time and place becomes necessary. To follow the implications of this last thought in its actual application would most probably lead back to remarks made by Jean Baudrillard in his essay *The Spirit of Terrorism*. (38) Responding to the latter essay in a noteworthy contribution to the heated debates which ensued, Khbeiz enquires whether the invention of costly coincidences such as orchestrating the almost simultaneous crash of two planes manned by 19 terrorists in one location is not complicit in occulting the excruciating coincidences which “knead[ed] in blood and flesh” (39) the lives of Palestinians and Iraqis, for instance, and yet remain invisible to the calendar of globalization. In other words, the provocation of a collision between the markers of place and time seems to cause violence which further contributes to the slighting of places. The spirit of terrorism, or rather the forceful attempt to intercept and disrupt the temporal calendar of global authorities, is eschatological; its task, stated and practiced, is to precipitate ultimate events or last

things. Critical of such provoked coincidences, the attempt to make a path that leads to a collision between place and time and fittingly garner the consequences is what Ghassan Salhab's film *The Last Man* (40) attempts and what Bilal Khbeiz has recently been coerced to exemplify through forced exile.

Descenders

In December of 2006, a few short months after the war, Rabih Mroué presented a performance entitled *Make Me Stop Smoking* in which he sits at a table to read and visually display on a screen stretched behind him excerpts from his many scrapbooks in which he has been collecting “worthless material for almost ten years, taking good care in arranging, documenting, indexing and preserving it from possible damage.” (41) According to the stated discourse of Mroué the performer, these scrapbooks and their content constitute a futile personal archive, an exhausting “invented memory” no longer able to undo itself into forgetfulness. Opening these scrapbooks is ostensibly Mroué's attempt to destroy this memory and to rid himself of its weight. Across 90 minutes, Mroué exposed his many unfinished projects, laughed even snickered at some of his ambitious plans, appealed to the audience for assistance and quoted at length texts by theoretician Jalal Toufic who at least within the scope of the performance appears as a contrary figure, an accomplished and published writer. (42) Possibly, the performance provides a clever, because oblique, contribution to the debate initiated by intellectuals in the early 1990's regarding the politics of memory following the initial success which met the reconstruction project of Beirut's city center as managed by the private company Solidère. (43) Coming as late as 2006, Mroué's performance seems to wish for forgetfulness as a reaction to the stultification of that initial debate into the fixed dyads of remembering as safeguarding tradition and forgetting as a neo-liberal forced amnesia. (44) Yet when attending this performance again after the devastating war of July-August, the performance hailed me in a manner altogether different. (45) Watching Mroué tarry in his scrapbooks after the war appeared symptomatic of a loss. The shifting emotional registers of the performer between hoping in soon to come accomplishments and lingering dejectedly in the futile details of newspaper clippings or videotaped rushes spoke of a self in diminution unable to grapple with a transforming and elusive world, metonymically

displaced onto unmanageable scrapbooks. Concisely stated, Mroué the performer appeared melancholic. Even if the performance does not develop an aesthetic for the split ego described by Freud as characteristic of a person suffering from the pathology of melancholia,(46) it nevertheless does enact the activity of someone devoid of a personal temporal course, namely a sequential time which can be organized into days to come and operative projects. Flipping through his scrapbooks, the performer weaves himself into a world of details, a gummy net from which no exit is sought. Having lost the face that looks toward the future, the performer seems to tergiversate. One could almost say that he literally turns his back in an attempt to stave-off the consequences of what is unfolding around him. (47) He, a melancholic, practices what he deems is his right to live in a place devoid of forward-time, a place with nowhere to go; but also, and more importantly, a place threatened with extinction. In tarrying, Mroué indicates what it means to be a tenant of places, from the Latin *tenere*, to hold and hold on to. His verbosity and many gesticulations have no direction. They are the signs and sounds of someone sliding slowly down a spiral, taking pleasure in hurling at those around him the debris of a language which sounds like an entreaty and a call for help but is in fact no more than the activity of one descending.

My reading of Mroué's performance is a belated recognition of the significance of Ghassan Salhab's film *Le Dernier Homme* (The Last Man) first screened in Lebanon on the 19th of September 2006. Completed before the summer war of 2006, it is an engaging work which provides a space in which to think the crisis which erupted with the assassination of Hariri and continues still. Salhab's film is apparently on vampires. And I suppose that it can be understood as such when shown outside Lebanon and Beirut more specifically. Yet equally variant as Mroué's performance, *Le Dernier Homme* is a film that interrupts the rules of the genre because permeable to context. Khalil, the main protagonist, is a surgeon at a hospital and an amateur of scuba diving. He knows the adjacent watery depths of the city and its viscous inside. His story, told through the aesthetics of vampire films, is, I argue, one of gradual surrender to a city inhabited by a 'chosen people'. Khalil lures and feeds on randomly chosen individuals and then duly visits the hospital's morgue to solemnly look at, ascertain and carry the knowledge born of his hunger. With each corpse found and sent to the icy drawers of the morgue, he recognizes his gradual and irreversible secession from sociality. His friends and colleagues loose him as he

becomes the unavailable surgeon, the one not here. In a notable sequence of scenes, the codes of vampire films are pressed to pour into a socio-political reading of Beirut: we follow Khalil enter a brothel, sit by a worker and gaze at her. Threatened, she averts her eyes towards the mirror in which her reflection is without that of the ensnaring guest. Then comes a solitary nocturnal dive with flashlight followed by a scene in which the local police present to eager media-representatives a man said to be the culprit. It is a sequence of scenes which proves the filmmaker conversant with vampire-film codes. Yet, the purport exceeds the genre to suggest a particular withdrawal of the surgeon from one social economy into another. As an inhabitant of the city, Khalil is invisible to those who live by the rules of exchange value, in this instance the sex-worker. He is also outside the reach of the law which requires that individuals be visible and apprehended as separate monads. The scene of the nocturnal dive with flashlight is suggestive of a traveler moving in a landscape other to those around him and lead by a vision available to him alone. Released of rules and laws, he is a man hungry. Feeding is what he does; it is his irrevocable investment in a final dwelling which will begin once he meets his kin, his chosen people, those who hold on to the city, its tenants. The appearance of one kinsman toward the end of the film expedites the descent of Khalil into the city. In a penultimate scene, he feeds on the remaining blood of one hapless inhabitant left warm by his kinsman. What follows is a 22 second-long scene of a drone-filled descent in dark waters sprinkled with light particles. Khalil finally dives into the dark thickness of the city never to emerge again. He will now live for as long as the city lives in an economy based on expenditure. No longer governed by an economy of exchange value, his gift is the promise of his inevitable outlay. (48) His descent into the city is not an investment in a better future or an attempt to outdo others in the morality of allegiance or fidelity. He certainly is not a native, loyal to the point of dying for his city or nation. Rather, he is one who lives for as long as the city will live and together will die. He will not survive to tell a story nor will the city survive his death and turn him into a martyr.

Khalil is also a melancholic. In his search for his chosen people, he gradually shifts from someone who feeds on the city to someone who joins the city in a terminal embrace. Beirut is a city Khalil searches for rather than a city to which he was once attached and then lost. (49) He seeks the deep city, to be of it, before its shadow, to paraphrase Freud's evocative expression, falls

upon him. (50) His final destination evokes a melancholy of infinite sadness rather than a melancholy cannibalism, as noted by Freud, which urges the ego to regress narcissistically and incorporate the intolerable other into itself and devour it in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development. (51) Khalil's feeding does not seem to manifest a craving to destroy in order to better possess the city: better ingested than lost. For if the melancholy cannibalistic imagination manifests, as Julia Kristeva argues, "the anguish of losing the other through the survival of self" and does so because it repudiates the reality of a loss and that of death as well, (52) Khalil's melancholy on the contrary sends him down the slope of a descent that will cease when the city ceases as well. In that respect, his descent is a chronotope. The last scene of the film is evocative for it shows the two kinsmen disappear as they exit a wide-angled view of the city following one another down an undefined passage. The city which lingers for a few more seconds on the screen in the retiring warmth of street lights is again a habitable place but with a reversed temporality. The invisible and prolonged descent of the two kinsmen, or rather tenants, adds a subterranean density to the place on the surface. The city lives not in its surface activities but rather in the deep pulse of its insides as activated, or rather disturbed, by those who descend. Its temporality is funnel-shaped, gradually narrowing but without a core, rather with increased formlessness. Caught between warring temporalities which herald the coming future, we, the last man, just might realize that the future happens elsewhere; underneath not ahead. Salhab's film suggests a chronotope which calls on us to turn around, descend and in doing so enact, each and every time, a desire to adjoin what little time we may have to the damaged time of this particular place.

Coda: indigenes and exiles

Lebanon is a time for martyrs and a land for mass graves. Those who die and are recognized for their sacrifice win for their relatives and clans the standing of indigenes. The remaining dead and their families are the luckless. Outside this equation, some struggle to make this country a place that lives in a time without impunity; a time with a future which does not hide the costs of its present deeds. For in Lebanon there are some who survive and do so in varying conditions and with contrary consequences. As survivors they share nevertheless the depth of the catastrophe

and, as I have tried to argue, are called upon to inherit the underneath of the city. If they do accept their lot, they can, through their descent, keep this place pulsating and palpable. What exceeds me and accordingly did not argue in this essay, is the actual depth of the descent. For never could I have imagined that Bilal Khbeiz, whose work not only makes this essay possible, but has also been invaluable to many writers and artists in Lebanon, is in fact continuing his descent while in exile. Vilified on cowardly internet-sites, abandoned by the daily newspaper in which he was employed for more than a decade, threatened with assassination and forced to abandon his apartment in Beirut, Khbeiz has recently chosen exile rather than accept one of the many spurious invitations to join the bloc of one of the two warring factions. His is an exile which tells of how deep the underneath of a city is and of how interminable the descent can be.