

Autopsy of a film that was never made

As I am asked to reflect on the notion of *Khtout el Tamas*, I realize that to me, the word *Tamas*, expresses today only the idea of division and separation. It seems impossible that it ever had another meaning, as it embodies the very idea of civil war, the one we have experienced, and by extension other civil wars. *Tamas* is now deeply integrated in our lexicon of war and to me can no longer encompass its original meaning of encounter and the notion of neighboring as long as there is no real peace, for we are not yet in time of peace and this was sadly confirmed by many events, specially the ones that occurred in Beirut in May 2008.

In May 2008, we could hear again the sound of shooting in the streets and sadly more than a hundred fifty persons died within a week, but the most striking thing in my eyes was the image of the “ring” avenue deserted and closed off by barricades. It was the exact same image of the ring in the 80’s during the war. Nothing was different in the image. Maybe that image is a fragment of time and history, which carries its own memory: events enacted or to be enacted in the future.

This physical and mental division of Beirut incarnated by the *Green line (khtout el Tamas)* is at the core of two of my works that I wish to reflect on from today’s perspective: the video documentary *Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak* (54 min. - 2003)¹, and the short written fiction story of the same title (1996-2003)².

In both works, the place designated as the *Green line* or dividing line, is central as an image and symbol, yet it is never defined and fails to be represented. One could say that although the dividing line physically exists, it became over time, a mental line that fragmented this city and undermined the mixed aspect of its life in an irreversible way.

In 1993, I was a film student and I felt a deep urgency to narrate and possibly visually represent the Lebanese wars. After I had watched the film *Rashomon*³, I decided to make a feature fiction film based on its structure and inspired by it, only I would transpose the story in the context of the war in Beirut. In 1996, I started developing the characters for this project and for years, I nourished the desire to make this fiction film, yet never worked seriously on it, as some important and relevant questions came in the way of making such a project.

How was I to recreate the decor of War? Is a fictive re-creation of this period’s tragic events a relevant thing to do now? Can one still believe in a realistic, almost naturalistic

¹Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak (54 min) was shot in 2002 and released in 2003. It is written, directed and produced by Lamia Joreige and co-produced by 03 productions (Dubai)

²*Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak* was originally written in French by Lamia Joreige in 1996, revised in 2002 and published in French and German in 2003 at the occasion of the exhibition *Disorientations*, curated by Jack Persekian at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. In 2009, rather than publishing an English and Arabic version, the author created a website around this short story, pushing further the participation of the reader and the idea of non-linearity of the narrative. hereandperhapselsewhere.com

³*Rashomon* is a 1950 Japanese crime mystery film directed by Akira Kurosawa. The film depicts the rape of a woman and the apparent murder of her samurai husband through the widely differing accounts of four witnesses, including the rapist and, through a medium, the dead man. The stories are mutually contradictory, leaving the viewer to determine which, if any, is the truth. (Wikipedia)

representation of wars? Was it appropriate to work with professional actors to incarnate the protagonists of the war? And is it even possible to represent or narrate such wars?

Could cinema, an art that had barely any history and no real industry in our country, succeed in representing the wars in Lebanon? More important is the fact that a variety of interesting films have been made on wars in other parts of the world, therefore, shouldn't the specific events of the Lebanese wars force us to rethink our ways of seeing and creating narratives?

I began to have doubts on the principle of making this fiction film, yet the question of how to represent the Lebanese wars and how to be a witness were still relevant. How was I approach our recent history? What image of it could I retain, what image of it would I re-create?

Some facts, dramas and experiences will never reach us and will remain unspoken, buried; we will never be able to witness their existence, but only presume that they are there, yet missing. This is due to the mechanism of memory, to its distortions and the possibility, even the necessity for human beings to forget. It is also a result of the impossible task of assembling all the testimonies and documents related to the past events because of a lack of time, but also, in the case of Lebanese wars, because today's everlasting presence in power of the wars' "lords" prevents us from digging in and judging those events, but also because the war is not really over.

Therefore, it became clear to me over years, that the only way to approach the possible representation and narration of the Lebanese wars was to accept our inability to represent them. I could only propose attempts of representation, fragments of history and fragments of truth, stories in the first person and presented as such. In refuting the idea of a unique truth, I would try to propose a counter discourse to the official one, or to the absence of any official one.

I find myself caught in a tension between the temptation and even the necessity of recounting our history, and the impossibility of fully accessing it. Both fiction and documentary modes seemed to be limited ways of representation. I became interested in blurring those categories in rethinking the connection between historical reality and fiction. I focused on assembling and /or producing documents and archival material as well as fictitious elements to reflect on the relation between individual stories and a collective history.

One could say that many artists of my generation who produced works from the end of the nineties until today in Beirut raise similar issues in their work, and that it is surely not coincidental. These artists' works also resonate with works by artists in other parts of the world, who are equally concerned with the use of documents as a mean to reflect on history and the mechanism of memory. Okwui Enwezor concludes in his essay for the catalogue of *Archive Fever*, the exhibition he curated at the International Center of Photography, in New York City in 2008⁴:

⁴The exhibition *Archive Fever* included works that relate to the use of archive and documents by local artist Walid Raad and Lamia Joreige, as well as artists from various countries.

Within *Archive fever*, the artist serves as a historic agent of memory, while the archive emerges as a place in which concerns with the past are touched by the astringent vapors of death, destruction and degeneration. Yet, against the tendency of contemporary forms of amnesia whereby the archive becomes a site of lost origins and memory is dispossessed, it is also within the archive that acts of remembering and regeneration occur, where a suture between the past and present is performed, in the indeterminate zone between event and image, document and monument.

I abandoned the project of making a fiction film and decided instead to make two projects: the first one would be a publication, a short fiction based on the structure of the film *Rashomon*, but transposed in the mid-eighties in Beirut. It would include photographs, which are documents of Beirut during the war and portraits from the collection of the Arab Image Foundation, as well as some photographs shot today by contemporary artists. The fictive elements and the archival material wouldn't be separate, but instead, would be equally used in the process of story telling. The second project would be a video shot in Beirut across what used to be the *Green line* dividing East and West Beirut. I would film it in a "documentary style" using archival photographs for the purpose of story telling, yet the assembled testimonies of the people encountered have also a fictional dimension. I would also try to regain a lost image of Beirut, an image that had been fragmented in my mind for so many years. How was I to represent Beirut? Could the fragmentation of Beirut be only represented through a fragmented image?

In the video *Houna wa roubbama hounak*, knowing that thousands of people disappeared and that in most cases, their bodies were not found and the circumstances of their disappearance never known, I ask the inhabitants I encounter as I cross Beirut around what used to be defined as the *Green Line*, if they knew someone who had been kidnapped 'here' during the war.

Originally, I wanted to use a fictive name or the name of a person I heard while walking through Beirut for the purpose of my investigation. From one person to the other, the "rumor" would grow and the "fictive" character would become "real". Soon enough the viewer would realize that this character doesn't really exist and that it was device to trigger a process of memory and reveal the multiplicity of existing discourses on the war as well as the immensity of the drama.

As I started filming, I realized the ethical limits of such a project and its anecdotic aspect. Although I was expecting to hear a lot of dramatic experiences, I was still overwhelmed by the magnitude of what I encountered. In almost every street I walked, someone had experienced a loss during the war. The reality was worse than what I could ever imagine. As I started my journey I was confronted right away to the wounds and the pain of people met as they revealed their stories to my camera, sometimes more than twenty years after a drama had occurred in their family. I could no longer play the tricky game of using a fictive character for the purpose of my project. This is not to say that fiction was impossible, but rather to say that in this very specific context, it became irrelevant. Had I gone on with my script as planned, I would have felt like an impostor.

I dropped the idea of the fictive character and went on filming by simply asking the

question: *Do you know of anyone who was kidnapped around here during the war?* I filmed during three weeks following a map of Beirut. As I crossed town, I discovered places laden with history. I punctuated my journey with stops at the place of former checkpoints set across the *Green line*, using archival photographs⁵ to find their exact location in the present time. At times people have a hard time to find their exact location. And when they do, often the present location doesn't match the archival photograph. Such was the case of *Ma'bar el Marfa's* spot, which today faces the Normandy garbage dump by the sea road in an area entirely reinvested by *Solidere*⁶. But it is also striking that some spots look almost exactly the same today than in the photographs taken in 1989. Such was the case of *Ma'bar Mathaf-Barbir* and *Sodeco*.

As I am filming without any preparation, I recorded the speech triggered by both the photograph and my question and at once the mechanism of memory itself. This process allow for the past to emerge in the present of the narration while it opens the possibility of many stories to be added in the future.

As the art critic Kaylen Wilson-Goldie wrote⁷: *The juxtaposition of still and moving images not only paces the work visually but also creates a temporal disjuncture between past and present. That disjuncture doubles as Joreige's subjects speak. They answer her questions with stories that are both visceral and vague, on and off the point. They slip between fact and fiction, between what seems to be a straightforward recollection of past events and what is clearly an interpretation of memories performed in the present. As the title of the film suggests, these stories are here and elsewhere at once.*

- Do you know of anyone who was kidnapped?⁸

- In fact, it happened to me once.- I got to the checkpoint. He said, "The papers for the pick-up". So, I gave him the papers. This other guy jumps out and says, "Welcome!". And I say, "What 'welcome'?" He took the papers from me and the phone calls began. After a while, they took me to Abed's Square, which is past the Museum, past Adlieh. They call it Abed's Square. They had a command center there. We went in. And, I used to work for people... May God grant them long life... They are very, very respectable people of high morals, from the Habre family. They had told me that if anything ever happened to me, to say that I have connections with Hajj Al Hawen. That was his nickname. And, he was from the Habre family. I told them that I know this Hawen guy. They pulled me over to the center and called him. So this guy comes. He comes in and says to me, "Where do you know me from boy?". I told him "I work for Abu Tony – Elie Habre – who told me if anything ever happened to me, I was to call you". He asked if anyone had touched me, or had come near me. I replied, "No. No. No." But, me? I can't tell you the state I was in. I was totally undone! There was a guy with me. They took him down. There was a guy with me in the room, this room with smoked glass, and they took him down. I didn't see a thing after that. Me, they took me out. They told me I could go. I said, no, I wasn't going anywhere until my boss, Abu Tony, comes. So, we called him. He came. And they escorted us through the crossing. I left. After about five days, a week, after my nerves settled down, I crossed back. It turned out that they had wanted my cousins, who lived in Ashrafieh, in what they used to call the Army Building, in the Karm el Zeitoun area. They wanted them because they were in the Syrian National Socialist Party. And the pick-up was in my cousin's name. When I found this out, I let the pick-up go

⁵The photographs used in *Houna Wa Roubbama Hounakwere* mostly taken by Abbas Salman, a war reporter, and all acquired from the archive of the daily newspaper As-Safir.

⁶*Solidere* is the name of the company that took in charge the reconstruction of downtown Beirut.

⁷Kaylen Wilson-Goldie / in *Out of Beirut*, 2006 Contemporary Art Practice in Post-war Lebanon: An introduction

⁸Excerpt from the video *Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak*.

and bought another. And from that day on, thank God, I kept going back and forth. God protected me.

- And the guy who was taken with you? They let him go?

- No. I never knew what happened to him. I asked about what happens to people who are taken down, and was told, "That's it".

- That was what happened that day at Abed's Square.

- Down? What was it? A room of...?

- Just like we had many rooms here. We had lots of rooms here. Pardon me, but the Murr Tower also stands witness to this. They had rooms down there... and there... and there... I mean, if you want to talk about their militias, you have to talk about the militias we had here. They're all the same.

By following the geographic path of the *Green Line*, using archival photographs and repeating one same question, I create a device through which I assemble and accumulate narratives that are as many fragments of history. These fragments are memory and oblivion at the same time, parts of an incomplete whole and assembled subsequently. Rearranged and re-interpreted, they border fiction. In doing so, I hope to restore an essential speech. To make visible and audible speech that has been willingly or unwillingly suppressed or sometimes ignored. Essential, because this speech is symptomatic of a peculiar period of our history, essential also because, even when it becomes fictitious, this speech is evidence of intense and rare human experiences, which, although related to a specific context, attain a universal dimension. While questioning the documentary genre, the diversity of the many stories recounted, their accumulation and unequal repetition links every personal experience to the collective one, making difficult if not unattainable the idea of a unique truth.

Kaelen Wilson Goldie writes⁹: *Just as Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* exposes rifts between past and present and between truth and fiction, the film itself shifts between elements of documentary and artistic practice. Joreige proceeds methodically from one site to the next. She repeats the same arsenal of questions like an ethnographer conducting field research. Yet *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* is loosely and atmospherically composed. The entire documentary genre has long been contested terrain, and Joreige forces viewers to consider what exactly it means to produce a document on film or video. Joreige draws upon certain conventions of traditional documentary film-making but diverges from them as well. She actively intervenes with her subjects. She uses no voice-over narration. She offers no statistics, no hard or fast evidence to support the history of the civil war. The film does not offer a definitive study on the subject of kidnapping or the disappeared. *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* poses the following questions: How was the civil war in Lebanon experienced by those who lived through it? Has the conflict been truly resolved? Have its causes and consequences been sufficiently or even adequately addressed?

Although we were in 2002, the everlasting presence of the war appeared in most of the stories recorded. It even translated through what people refused to tell me, what they feared to express or couldn't remember, and what was repeated from a person to another.

⁹Kaylen Wilson-Goldie / in *Out of Beirut*, 2006 Contemporary Art Practice in Post-war Lebanon: An introduction

- Do you know of anyone kidnapped here?¹⁰

- Yes, there's my nephew. But not here. I think at Jamhour, he was kidnapped. My nephew and his cousin, they were kidnapped during the war. During the days of... I can't say... I'm scared. Here is Qasqas. The road to Tayouneh is there. All of this is the road to Tayouneh. And there's the Museum from here. Look, (*she points at the avenue below*). I remember once, a car was passing with a young man inside, and he was shot. Here. Down here.

In both the video and the short story, I underline the losses and the gaps of memory and history, accepting them as an integral part of a non-linear narrative, pointing out the impossibility to access a complete account of the events.

The short fiction *Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak* is set amidst the civil war in a zone of demarcation of Beirut. I deliberately kept vague the geography of the place, as well as any identification to a specific community or militia. Still the fact that the story is set in zone around the *Green Line* is crucial to convey the idea of fragmentation of space and division of society as well as to create a fictional geography that nevertheless reflect on a tragic reality.

*September 1987. In a district of Beirut, on the line of demarcation, a man inquires as to the disappearance and probable murder of Wahid Saleh: thirty something, dark-haired and bearded. That day he was wearing grey pants and a white shirt; it was June 15, 1986.*¹¹

The dramatic event of the disappearance and probable murder of Wahid Saleh, is recounted by five protagonists including the dead himself. The accounts of the protagonists follow one another in an illusory attempt to reconstitute the event through clues and cross-examination. The gaps in the story prevent us from reaching a unique truth.

Ziad (a sniper)

*I can clearly recall the shot: It was the last I fired from that place, from that roof. It was a difficult shot. The man was running fast and erratically in all directions. Immediately after, we were obliged to trade our location for a hiding spot in another tranquil corner of the city.*¹²

Zahi (an old man)

*I was trying to think when I heard him approaching. He entered the room and looked at me. His face was tense and serious. Taking a quick and determined step, he walked toward me. I could no longer think or move. He reached out his hand to take back his weapon. I was afraid. What would he do to us? My arm automatically folded to evade his grasp. My fingers nervously tensed as I clutched the revolver nervously when he tried to take it again. The shot burst out suddenly. I did not want to kill him. I am neither a soldier nor a criminal. The bullet struck him in the head. He collapsed in front of me.*¹³

¹⁰Excerpt from the video *Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak*.

¹¹Introduction paragraph of the short story *Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak*, written by Lamia Joreige

¹²Excerpt from the account of Ziad the sniper, in the short story *Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak*

¹³Excerpt from the account of Zahi, the old man, in the short story *Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak*

Each protagonist claiming the murder of Wahid Saleh, raises the question of responsibility, making each one of us a potential actor in this crime, and by extension each one us an actor of this war.