# A BOOK REVIEW IN THE FORM OF A POLEMIC

## CHAD ELIAS'S *POSTHUMOUS IMAGES: CONTEMPORARY ART AND MEMORY POLITICS IN POST-CIVIL WAR LEBANON* AND THE OLD NEW WORLD ORDER

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Chad Elias. *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.

Chad Elias's *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post–Civil War Lebanon* (2018) is the first university press book in English that reads contemporary art in post–civil war Lebanon through the lens of collective memory and the image. It claims to study "the unresolved nature of this history and the primary role that the cultural field has played in framing public debates over collective memory of recent wars in Lebanon,"[1] through five themed chapters dedicated to Lebanese art made in and after the 1990s. These cover sexual politics and the geopolitical translation of narratives in Walid Raad's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2001); the role of martyrdom and image in Rabih Mroueh and Akram Zaatari's performance and video work; the politics of the erasure of memory in urban space, as seen through the lens of architect Bernard Khoury and of sculptor and installation artist Marwan Rechmaoui; Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's film *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2013) and the "futurity" of civil war space programs; and a conclusion titled "Time Bomb," which asks what wars do to representation, rather than what images of war represent. The book frames its

1 Elias, 7.

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interests following the 1975–90 civil and geopolitical wars that ravaged Lebanon, suggesting that, through film, photography, performance, video, and other practices, a handful of Lebanese artists produced "posthumous images" and "communities of witnessing," represented those that had no representation, challenged and allegedly unsettled distinctions between fact and fiction—as well as between official history and memory—and "reconfigure[d] broken links with the past."[2] Thus, in the author's view, these artists and works contribute to the work of "collective memory" and the imagination of the future. Elias, who teaches art history at Dartmouth College, spent a considerable amount of time in Lebanon and many hours interviewing Lebanese artists about their work. The volume is strongly shaped by these conversations, as it relies on their narratives to construct its own fragmented story.

Having caught the attention of curators and critics in the late 1990s and early 2000s as part of the art world's transnational trajectory, the so-called postwar generation of Lebanese contemporary artists received ample attention in art periodicals, magazines, newspapers, and master's and doctoral theses. One would, in theory, enthusiastically welcome a book-length reading of artists and artworks emerging from the Lebanese wars of the 1990s and early 2000s that deals with complex conceptual forms and discourses, as such a work might help us make sense of the particulars of the local context with regards to the roles of art, politics, and representation therein, as well as connect these to broader histories.

This review of *Posthumous Images*, however, diagnoses the book as a symptom of an unexamined, neoliberal version of human rights, both in Lebanon and beyond, and argues that it is a missed opportunity. The author inadequately outlines his own task, and the book flounders in incomplete arguments and misleading representations of what is at stake for art, politics, and life in post–civil war Lebanon. First, the study offers a lopsided rendition of the political history of Lebanon; second, it lacks an articulated art-historical framework, keeping the discussion of art nominal and descriptive, while its choice of some artists over others is arbitrary and tenuous; and third, it unwittingly adopts a postmodern approach to history and methodology. In the pages of *Posthumous Images*, the latter framework remains anchored in an unstated humanitarianism that emphasizes how individual artists and the postwar condition produce notions of "collective memory" and communities of witnessing.

2 Ibid., 26.

One wonders here about the author's decision to omit Lebanese artist and essayist Walid Sadek and his extensive work on memory and the question of the image. Sadek's writings and artworks have sought to invert memorial tropes by signaling the burden of too much remembrance, by developing a notion of witnesses who know too much, rather than the impossibility of representation, and by considering what he calls "the labor of missing," as well as "the labor of the ruin." Sadek's later work underscored what he referred to as the figure of the "non-posthumous survivor," who does not emerge from trauma or historical rupture, yet who, like the witness who knows too much, carries a knowledge that "accrues into a historical future."[3]

The theoretical and historical blind spots of Elias's study may reveal its complicity with a human rights regime that it neither explicitly claims nor disavows.[4] The author ignores key economic and social changes to the world and to the Lebanese state apparatus following the end of the Cold War. He often either reduces the Lebanese wars to their sectarian roots[5] or presents them as "a proxy battleground involving foreign powers,"[6] while neglecting authors and volumes (including works in Arabic) that cover the war and the postwar politics and economy, the internationalist battles for Palestine, and—symptomatically, as we will see below—the end of the Lebanese civil war's imbrication with a counterrevolutionary "humanitarian present."[7]

3 Walid Sadek, "When Next We Meet: On the Figure of the Non-Posthumous Survivor," *ARTMargins* 4, no. 2 (June 2015): 48–63, 53. Many of Sadek's essays are collected in *The Ruin to Come: Essays from a Protracted War* (Pully, Switzerland: Motto Books, and Taipei: Taipei Biennial, 2016). The influential artists and filmmakers Ziad Abillama, Tony Chakar, Mohamad Soueid, Lina Saneh Majdalanie, and Ghassan Salhab, among others, are also omitted from Elias's narrative.

4 See Jessica Whyte, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (London: Verso, 2019).

5 See, for instance, Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). The sectarian roots we refer to include narratives and founding stories such as the Ain el Rummaneh bus, emphasizing the sectarianism of Mount Lebanon, the sectarian Christian-Muslim division of East and West Beirut, and so on.

6 Elias, 6.

7 In line with numerous volumes on and diagnoses of human rights, especially Michael Barnett's *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), Dider Fassin's *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), and Eyal Weizman's *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso, 2017), Simon Reid-Henry uses the phrase "our humanitarian present." See "On the Politics of Our Humanitarian Present," *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* no. 31 (2013): 753–60.

## MEMORY, WITNESSING, AND THE IDEOLOGY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

According to Annette Wieviorka, following the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1962, a wave of witnessing saw victim-survivor memory and testimony becoming foregrounded in the public sphere and validated before the law and the mass media alike: "With the Eichmann trial, the witness became an embodiment of memory (*un homme-mémoire*), attesting to the past and to the continuing presence of the past. Concurrently, the genocide came to be defined as a succession of individual experiences with which the public was supposed to identify."[8]

In Mengele's *Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics*, Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman argue for "the parallel emergence of the thing," a paradigm shift from speaking subjects-qua-victims, who remember and tell their story as key protagonists of an incumbent human-rights order, to the era of material witnessing as evidence.[9] This new "architecture of public truth" differs from the memorial subject of the first and second waves of witnessing (following the Holocaust and atomic bombs) in its articulation of justice. As Weizman reminds us, for better or for worse: "The present forensic sensibility seeks to bypass human testimony, especially that of the victims of violence, precisely because the memory of violent events, often complicated by trauma, is seen to be marked by the very irrationality, sometimes madness, of the perpetrator, and thus, to a certain extent, to mirror it."[10]

In Robert Meister's *After Evil: The Politics of Human Rights*, Human Rights Discourse (HRD)[11] is a regime that has become dominant since the end of the Cold War. Located historically in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, if not in the messianic, Pauline Christian tradition, HRD organizes (state/extrastate) subjects into the status of reconciled or unreconciled victims, perpetrators, and beneficiaries of a new world order. According to Meister, HRD is a global, ethical, liberal discourse

8 Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. from the French by Jared Stark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 88.

9 Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012). See also Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

10 Eyal Weizman, "Introduction: Forensis," in *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, ed. Anselm Franke and Eyal Weizman (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 10.

11 Robert Meister, *After Evil: The Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). For a critique of contemporary art and human rights, see also Victoria Ivanova, "Two Lives, One Order," last modified June 2014, https://barddraft.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/ivanova.pdf, and Suhail Malik, "Ape Says No," *Redhook Journal* (June 2013), http://www.bard.edu/ccs/redhook/ape-says-no/.

and practice that accounts for the counterrevolutions of the late 20th and even 21st centuries in terms of, among other things, the (brutal) opposition to and interdiction of socialism, the conflation of communism with authoritarianism, and the founding of a liberal subject that is suited to new market economics.[12] It does this, in part, by manifesting a will to overcome the cruelties committed in an "evil past" at the hands of former dictators, combatants, or even revolutionaries, which shall not be repeated. With its courts and tribunals for select perpetrators, truth and reconciliation commissions, and preemptive wars, HRD has rationalized and managed the wars in Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and even the postwar periods in countries such as Lebanon. To simplify, by relegating evil to the past and justice to the future, it has managed the transition to a deferred justice in the post–Cold War world. Yet, rather than justice, it seeks reconciliation by enforcing and naturalizing the roles of victim, perpetrator, and beneficiary.[13] Former victims need to demonstrate that they are not damaged by, or resentful for, the atrocities that befell them, while beneficiaries who were sometimes former perpetrators inherit the gains of a new order. The battles of the 20th century were thus no longer seen as the revolutions and counterrevolutions they had been, but as crimes, punishments, and acquittals that needed humanitarian forums and international intervention. In this usage of Human Rights, and in this foreclosure of former (leftist) emancipatory politics, there is also a cultural dimension: for the (temporal) ideology of transitional justice as evil-past to remain past without demanding present and future justice, and other material consequences, one condition is that it must be remembered. The importance (and resurgence) of memory and trauma studies is one index of this logic.[14] HRD, then, runs

12 Whyte, *Morals of the Market*.

13 Meister, *After Evil*.

14 These include Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002); Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999); Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Richard Crownshaw, Jane Kilby, and Antony Rowland, eds., *The Future of Memory* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); Ana Douglas and Thomas A. Vogler, eds., *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1994); Shohana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Ussama Makdisi and P. A. Silverstein, eds., *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

counter to revolutionary politics in the name of a self-sufficient ethics of memory. There are certainly innumerable analyses and critiques of human rights, yet the relevance of the claims above to our argument becomes clear below.

## NO PAST, NO FUTURE

The Lebanese civil wars (1975–90) were officially declared ended under the National Accord Document and the amendment to the constitution, signed in Saudi Arabia and dubbed the Taef Agreement. Overseen by the Saudi monarch alongside representatives from Syria, Iran, France, and the United States, it included most wartime militia heads and their new allies in the new balance of power and offered them amnesty while creating Syrian state tutelage.[15] Subsequently, the Saudi-backed billionaire Prime Minister Rafik Hariri created the controversial, private real-estate company Solidere from within the prime ministerial office's Council for Development and Reconstruction, scrapped the former master plan for the capital, and charged Solidere with the reconstruction of Beirut's city center, the former Burj.

Elias claims that "the struggle over collective memory" in the Lebanese body politic crystallized, on the one hand, in the reconstruction of Beirut's Central District and, on the other, in the state's "handling of crimes committed during the civil wars."[16] However, he neither elaborates on the appropriative nature of private reconstruction nor analyzes post-Taef's juridical aspects as part of the discussion on posthumous images and postwar memory, alluding only in passing to the "unresolved"

15 The Taef amendments can be read at https://www.un.int/lebanon/sites/www.un.int/files/Lebanon/the_taif_agreement_english_version.pdf.
Elias fails to cite the numerous studies related to the political-economic and geopolitical aspects of the post–Taef context. See, for instance, Toufik K. Gaspard, *A Political Economy of Lebanon 1948–2002: The Limits of Laissez Faire* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004); Theodor Hanf, "The Sceptical Nation: Opinions and Attitudes Twelve Years after the End of the War," in *Lebanon in Limbo: Postwar Society and State in an Uncertain Regional Environment*, ed. Theodor Hanf and Nawaf Salam (Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos, 2003), 197–228; Theodor Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993); Jamil Mouawad and Hannes Bauman, "Wayn El-Dawla? Locating the Lebanese State in Social Theory," *Arab Studies Journal* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 66–90; and Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007). Moreover, in using the language of crimes committed and trials wanting (implying that we may need a tribunal or criminal court to try or absolve the perpetrators of war crimes, while Taef's beneficiaries run the country), Elias falls prey to a humanitarian blind spot, which is precisely that the beneficiaries (and perpetrators) are those in power who confirm that HRD exists—it may not be more sanctioned "memory," in the form of tribunals and commissions, that is needed.

16 Elias, 7.

nature of the wars following the accords that ended them ("no victor no vanquished"[17]). Accurately he claims that, insofar as the accord "succeeded in providing a formal cessation to hostilities, it avoided implementing any firm resolution for addressing the underlying social and political problems that led to the war in the first place."[18] Yet, Elias, reinforces a popular confusion. The postwar Lebanese state, the leading beneficiary of the aftermath of the civil war, had mishandled the crimes committed by its own wartime protagonists. Unclear about what such mishandling might imply, the author falls prey to a confusion between the general amnesty without trial or deposal granted to wartime party heads through the Pax Taef ("no victor no vanquished" is a common Lebanese postwar refrain) and the trope of postwar *amnesia*, which would allegedly require the work of collective memory in the first place. This reproduces the belief that the end-of-war-accord was in fact a harbinger of peace, whereas, according to much scholarship on the subject, Lebanon continued to endure protracted structural violence by other means.[19]

The book, then, seems to take at face value the role of state-sanctioned amnesia, arguing that "legally imposed amnesia"[20] was exercised by Solidere through its "erasure of the traces of war,"[21] enabling it to project an image of the city that seemed to look forward and backward at the same time.[22] Unclear what the latter entails, Solidere did indeed destroy more buildings than the war itself had, clearing the way for a wave of privatization in the public sector and offering stocks in return for its appropriation of both private and public land. However, readings such as the one offered by Saree Makdisi, in his essay "Beirut/*Beirut*," detail the *ways* in which memory—and the past—were neither

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 6.

19 Countless civil society initiatives and slogans aimed at national dialogue, interconfessional peace and reconciliation occurred during the postwar period, via figures or organizations such as Pere Gregoire or UMAM-DR. See, for example, J. Robin Burns and Robert Aspeslagh, eds., *Three Decades of Peace Education around the World: An Anthology* (London: Routledge, 2014). More critical scholarship or writing includes Sune Haubolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Sami Hermez, *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Samir Kassir, "Ahwal al Dhakira fi Lubnan" ["The Conditions of Memory in Lebanon"], in *Mémoire pour l'avenir*, ed. Amal Makarem (Beirut: Dar Annahar, 2002); Sadek, *The Ruin to Come*; Fawwaz Traboulsi, "Does Guilt Matter?" *Jadalyyia* no. 16 (June 2011), http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1911/does-guilt-matter; and Lucia Volk, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

20 Elias, 95.

21 Ibid., 8.

22 Ibid., 10.

missing nor deleted, but rather *instrumentalized* by Solidere and its postwar government supporters, in order to ideologically engineer an architectural and temporal pastiche in the city center, an idyllic version of the prewar past, which propagated a lifestyle that had in fact never existed.[23] This left Solidere—with its ironic motto "Ancient City of the Future" and its office in close proximity to the head of the Future Movement and then–prime minister—positioned as the natural purveyor of centuries of empire and "civilization."[24] To claim, as Elias does, that this private reconstruction and its consequences are "still [an] undertheorized problem"[25] is remarkably inaccurate, given the scholarship and activism over the decades following the Lebanese civil wars, which his book does little to incorporate.[26]

By claiming that we have not worked through the past, *Posthumous Images* reinforces the very HRD (the war configured as "passing illness"[27]) that it simultaneously appears to be criticizing. However, as Lebanese theorists and sociologists have reminded us, civil war is a protracted temporality, and the appeal to postwar memory may not be so simple. As Sadek argues:

> The Lebanese appear agonistic, seeking release from a morbid past that inhabits them. The pairing of actual violence with this longed-for future release, indefinitely deferred, generates an ethic of hope that appeals to a wholesale rejection and abandonment of the past. . . . Accordingly, this protracted *now* holds the Lebanese, who, amidst a structural violence, in turn palliatively represent it as a necessary furnace for a yet-to-be-born, nonsectarian future when the past will finally be declared evil and evil be declared past.[28]

The conditions of the Lebanese civil wars manifested as a protracted *now*, and it may be a mistake to insist that the state moved past

23 Saree Makdisi, "Beirut/*Beirut*," in *Tamass: Contemporary Arab Representations, Beirut/Lebanon 1* (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 2002), 26–39.

24 Toufic, in the "Ruins" essay cited above, also elaborates and theorizes this point.

25 Elias, 10.

26 To give just two such academic examples, I direct the reader to Aseel Sawalha, *Reconstructing Beirut: Memory and Space in a Postwar Arab City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), and Peter G. Rowe and Hashim Sarkis, eds., *Projecting Beirut: Episodes in the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1998).

27 Walid Sadek discusses Ziad Abillama, a crucial postwar artist omitted by Elias, in "From Excavation to Dispersion: Configurations of Installation Art in Post-War Lebanon," in *Tamas: Contemporary Arab Representations*, ed. Fundacio Antoni Tapies and Catherine David (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002), 66–81, 67.

28 Sadek, "When Next We Meet," 49–50.

this *now* into the war's aftermath, given that both the Taef Agreement's structures and constitutional amendments should be either implemented in full or—as the 2019 and ongoing revolutionary uprisings have demanded—scrapped. The refrain of a rhyming chant during the revolts against the post–Taef regime and economy was "We are the popular revolution, and you are the civil war"—meaning that only now, with these revolts, had the civil war ended.[29] Thus, it was both unsurprising and timely to witness a mass uprising against the neoliberal economic and sectarian base that had benefited from and constructed the postwar state on the basis of privatization and debt. Hence, to assign "collective memory" of the past and "communities of witnessing" as achievements of the Lebanese artists of the 1990s and 2000s means both to relegate the war to an amnesic past and to undertheorize, and indeed occlude, the history of the place and time on which the book is grounded. The temporality of protracted war is precisely what cannot be liberated from that past through mere remembrance.

The very relationship to the past as present enables the Lebanese political and state institutions' servitude to a ruling economic elite. Jamil Mouawad aptly reminds us of this in his critique of Lebanese social and state *resilience*, the alleged withstanding of hardship that disallows change, as that which governs and conserves the state–private sector–society nexus and status quo.[30]

## NOT HISTORY, MEMORY

Given the vague notion of remembrance in *Posthumous Images*, its lack of a materially grounded reading of (civil) war as symptomatic of modernity's struggles between left and right politics, driven by class, sect, and competing nationalisms (and later, by the March 8 and 14 political divisions, as they came to be known), Elias overrides history with collective memory. The book further neglects history through a lack of reflexivity regarding its own adoption of the humanitarian narrative of memory and reconciliation, through showing personal actors (here artists) as seemingly reconciled victims.[31] Elias does make

29 Hence, the "postwar" label, used by Elias without any questioning, is merely a chronological signifier that does not point to the qualitative shift of a "post-."

30 Jamil Mouawad, "Unpacking Lebanon's Resilience: Undermining State Institutions and Consolidating the System?," *Instituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) Working Papers* 17, no. 29 (October 2017): 1–16.

31 Having said that, it is relevant to note that some artists, filmmakers, and poets working in the post–civil war era were themselves combatants.

many references to "communities of witnessing,"[32] "community memory,"[33] "memory work,"[34] and "memory cultures,"[35] without explaining or theorizing the use of these terms, except for claiming them as part of the work artists do for others "who have been historically denied political representation and so effectively silenced or rendered invisible."[36] In the absence of a historical framework or periodization, one wonders how to validate the unsubstantiated trope of "giving a voice to the voiceless," and who these voiceless might be, given the study's lack of elaboration of the modern (and modernist) issues of war and representation, experience and event, or history and memory, and how these are the concerns of contemporary art.

The literature on witnessing is vast. However, *Posthumous Images* neglects the 20th-century psychoanalytic and aesthetic debates on witnessing, catastrophe, trauma, mourning, and representation,[37] which would have allowed it to historicize its own contribution, thereby laying bare its politics. Moreover, the trope of "collective memory" ties the book to a contradictory framework, which forecloses a historical understanding of politics in favor of a (disavowed) trauma model: "The impulse to analyze these practices through the framework of trauma risks evacuating them of their potential as a site of political agency";[38] "in my account . . . [w]ar . . . is not an unrepresentable trauma."[39] By making a claim to amnesia and memory, trauma becomes the hidden face of Elias's analysis, because this is what memory models have been founded on in the literature since at least the Second World War, if not decades earlier, when Freud theorized war neurosis.[40] While Elias fails to self-reflexively theorize trauma, he makes a claim to trauma theory.

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32 Elias, 10, 94.

33 Ibid., 95.

34 Ibid., 97.

35 Ibid., 101.

36 Ibid., 17.

37 See note 14, especially the Caruth, Felman, and Laub, and Crownshaw et al. sources. See also Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); as well as the earlier-20th-century work in psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, and others.

38 Elias, 15.

39 Ibid., 16.

40 The two disciplines are connected from as early as Freud's work on World War I war neuroses. See Sigmund Freud, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses*, ed. Sandor Ferenczi and Karl Abraham (Whitefish, SK: Kessinger, 2010).

Chapter 3, "Latent Images, Buried Bodies: Mourning Lebanon's Disappeared," is concerned with the thousands who went missing during the Lebanese civil wars by way of artworks that revolve around relatives kidnapped or disappeared. These include documentary films such as *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (Lamia Joreige, 2003), the feature film *A Perfect Day* (Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 2005), the installation *Lasting Images* (Hadjithomas and Joreige, 2003), and Ghassan Halwani's street drawings and ongoing urban and personal research into the missing. Elias reads these works through the prism of a state-sanctioned, intentional forgetting that, by means of the Lebanese amnesty laws, buries the past. Thus, according to Elias, "the intangible terrain of human testimony"[41] and suppressed memory are addressed through these artworks—as well as through archive projects by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Lebanese UMAM–Documentation and Research, who additionally "open up a third space for memory work that breaks with the silence of the state and the prevailing language of communitarianism."[42] In spite of state moratoria on remembrance, the families of the disappeared and dedicated NGOs have taken over this legal task. "The law places the burden on the family of the missing, since it is they, rather than the state, who must request hearing on the matter. . . . By the same token, do the kin of the missing have an obligation to wait for someone who will most likely never come back?"[43] More unanswered questions remain. What purpose do these various forms of memorialization serve, justice or remembrance? Is the space of the art world the place where the work of memory can unfold? Is it the role of artists and NGOs to administer performative justice—the function of reconciliation commissions elsewhere—or to even convene the memories of communities? Although vital investigative, advocacy, and lobbying work has been done in Lebanon by the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared, the structure of post-war perpetrator-beneficiary disables the kind of justice and accountability families seek, since warlords and postwar beneficiaries (including neighboring states themselves) will not hold themselves accountable for the disappeared.

In insisting on an ethical, humanitarian framework of remembrance, Elias fails to question the seemingly static roles played by

41 Elias, 105.
42 Ibid., 97.
43 Ibid., 110.

certain NGOs, artists, and the state, telling the reader that to counteract a culture of enforced amnesia, we need "truth seeking" and "memory management."[44] He thus misses the chance to explore or theorize the different possible forms and spaces of waiting for the missing instantiated by the case of the kidnapped and disappeared, and the notions of postponed justice and unreconciled victims (dead or alive). The author argues that the films and street art he discusses tell stories, weave personal webs of memory of the missing, highlight their absence, and give them their due memory. Without addressing the psychoanalytic frameworks involved in the (liberal) subject of memory, or even the work of mourning involved in such working-through, Elias leads us to believe that, in contrast to the exhibition Missing (2008)—an extensive display of the faces and names of the disappeared, organized by UMAM–Documentation and Research—such artists and artworks do memory work by reflecting on the flesh and image of the disappeared through tracing their absence. However, without a clearly articulated memory model, or an art-theoretical framework through which to read these art forms, exhibitions, and other propositions as symptoms of broader ideological forces, it is impossible to verify such hyperbole.[45]

## NO ART HISTORY BECAUSE IT'S THE END OF HISTORY?

Although Elias claims that Jalal Toufic's notion of "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster" offers a key for reading some Lebanese artworks, he neither fully explains the theory, nor does he link it to the vast literature on memory, witnessing, and representation that are the book's central areas of interest. Toufic developed "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster" in his book *Forthcoming* (2000) as part of an exegetic consideration of aspects of Shiite Islam that he later reworked into a standalone book.[46] The operation of "the withdrawal past a surpassing disaster" is largely predicated on the immaterial withdrawal of images, artworks, artifacts, books, and other symptoms of "tradition" at a time when a society undergoes long bouts

44 Ibid., 99.

45 What if the problem were too much remembering and not too much forgetting? What is the role of mourning after remembering—as theorized in psychoanalysis—on a communal scale? Elias does not address these issues. See Sadek, "When Next We Meet," and Walid Sadek and Mayssa Fattouh, "Tranquillity Is Made in Pictures," *Fillip* 17 (2012): 56–63.

46 Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (Forthcoming Books, 2009), http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal_Toufic,_The_Withdrawal_of_Tradition_Past_a_Surpassing_Disaster.pdf.

of disastrous wars or aggressions. Tradition may be visible, or return as counterfeit, yet, following Toufic, it becomes materially unavailable, as if the tradition itself embodied resistance. The book does not tell its readers how this theory informs his reading of Lebanese postwar memory and art. Instead, Elias refers in passing to terms that are left unelaborated, and conflates Toufic's terms with others, but without any semiotic, cultural analysis: "withdrawal" versus "obliviousness," "referent" versus "tradition," "being unable to access" versus "being indifferent."[47]

These absences and confusions are also evident in chapter 1, entitled "Captive Subjects: On the Geopolitics of Sex and Translation in Walid Raad's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*," and in pages of the conclusion that are dedicated to the work of Raad, which Elias suggests is connected to Toufic's theory of withdrawal mentioned above.[48] Listing Raad's early concerns ("How do we represent traumatic historical events of collective historical dimensions when the very notion of experience is itself in question? . . . How does one witness the passing of an extremely violent present?"[49]), which were informed by trauma in psychoanalysis and critical theory, Elias excludes from his analysis the importance of Raad's *Atlas Group* as an artistic apparatus and parody of an archive that is itself the artwork, and from which Raad's subsequent work arises. The *Atlas Group* gives Raad a license and an authorial voice to produce, and for us to view, conceptual documentary artworks filed under various names, heteronyms, and fictional as well as historical storylines. Through these, the *Atlas Group* lays bare the constitution of documentary truth, allowing the fictional contraption to become the ground on which history writing can take *form*. Given his work with the form of historical record, as well as his emphasis on working through and on exposing the photographic apparatus, it can be argued that Raad is a (political) formalist in a sense that takes us back to history and historical criticism.[50] Precisely because of Raad's attention to form (via the medium of photography and the *Atlas Group*

47 Elias, 11.

48 The accuracy of this claim is unclear, given that Raad only came across Toufic's writings later, in the 2000s.

49 Elias, 13–14.

50 An argument about formalism and history was made by Brecht and by later neo-Brechtian art and film critique. See Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Georg Lukàcs, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977, 2007); Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2000), 109–59; Steve Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, One Work

as a historical and authorial device), perusing even casually through the *Group*'s files makes it clear that he is interested in studying the category of history, even metahistory, by showing the sutures of the conditions that produce its writing, as well as the sutures of documentary and conceptual photography. He demonstrates the ways in which documentary as a device has a form that can be rendered apparent and thus denaturalized. History for Raad is a form anchored in the material conditions of its making. The *Atlas Group*'s existence as a fiction *embodies* this committed aesthetic strategy.[51] Given the plethora of writings on the *Atlas Group* (contrary to Elias's surprising claim that there is little scholarship on Raad's work),[52] it is difficult to discern the position from which the author diagnoses the artist's work, what precisely his claims are regarding the politics of its images and forms, or how something like the geopolitics of gender might fit into his discussion.

One of the book's intended aims is to study the role of audiovisual media in "identity formations within sites marked by a history of territorial conflict and political volatility."[53] In chapter 2, "Resistance, Video Martyrdom, and the Afterlife of the Lebanese Left," *Posthumous Images* invokes the reappearance and restaging (analog and digital) of images of former leftist fighters after their death, using two artworks to foreground the issue of so-called "subaltern agency."[54] The chapter explores Akram Zaatari's documentary essay *All Is Well on the Border Front* (1997) and Rabih Mroueh's performance *Three Posters* (2000), both of which, according to Elias, address questions about how former resistance fighters can be represented and ethical questions that martyr video testimonies raise about their appropriation.

In different ways, both works address an aspect of the Lebanese left's struggle against Israeli occupation, the losses incurred, and being overtaken by an Islamic resistance. Both works pay close attention to

series (London: Afterall, 2012); Sylvia Harvey, "Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties," *Screen* 23, no. 1 (1982): 45–59; and the work of Yve-Alain Bois on formalism.

51 Both the *Atlas Group* and lecture-performances such as "My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars, January 21, 1986," are predicated on detailed juridical and journalistic research, since Raad is a ferocious and obsessive researcher and investigator—if only to then show the limits of these lines of inquiry. Elias had ample opportunity to focus on the artistic strategies of the investigations and displays of forensic architecture, but he mentions these only in passing, without a thorough analysis of how they are radically different from memorial work.

52 Elias, 33.

53 Ibid., 55.

54 Ibid.

formal concerns, including the question of documentary mediation and testimony, in the case of Zaatari, and performance, acting, and recorded testimony in the case of Mroueh. The discussion of these works presented Elias with the opportunity to explore the politics of the left and the questions young artists had in the late 1990s regarding audio and visual media. He does fleetingly acknowledge that both works are predicated on foregrounding the construction of documentary truth (evidently mediated, scripted, read, and rehearsed in both works), yet he proceeds to revisit the categories of testimony, heroism, and martyrdom as functions of remembrance or reenactment. Elias, unfortunately, does not read the struggles and critiques embodied in these works through the Lebanese Communist Party and its secular allies, insisting instead that both artworks look at the way in which secular parties valorize what he dismissively, and in passing, calls the "master signifiers" of "homeland, "martyrdom," "liberation," and "Arab blood."[55]

It could be that the (unstated) psychoanalytic proposition that trauma ceases to be trauma and becomes memory once it has been rehearsed and narrated is meant to appear in Elias's study under the guise of the statements that those "who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (without citations) and that "for artists who have inherited the legacies of the defeated Lebanese Left, the reenactment of the past conjures up the possibility of breaking out of the temporal loop of traumatic history."[56] It is then difficult to gauge, from this chapter, how the so-called subaltern and its traumatic history, or indeed the left, should come together in the aesthetic and formal choices of the artists, despite the interesting, yet short-lived attention the book pays to the issue of technological mediation in both artworks and the ways in which it renders the image and the apparatus materially present.

According to Elias, Mroueh's and Zaatari's works exist beyond what Wendy Brown has called "left melancholy" ("nostalgia as an attitude") because they allow us to imagine another future by "forming links with foreclosed moments of revolutionary possibility."[57] Given the number of postcolonial and post-Soviet artworks that have dealt with global histories of liberation and histories of the left after the 1990s, we can easily claim that such works do not, by merely dealing with the past,

55 Ibid., 57.
56 Ibid., 58.
57 Ibid.

allow for a different future. Without explaining whether and how the works formally and politically enable such a future, and without situating the reading of such artworks within a framework for the history of the Lebanese left, an insightful contribution cannot be made. The reader would have then understood that neither mere forgetting, nor the denial of "immediate access to the referent"[58]—the Lebanese wars—is what was really at stake.

*Posthumous Images* is riddled with missed opportunities to critically theorize the past's relationship to the future, which is so relevant to the Lebanese context's temporal politics, as we saw above. An example is Elias's treatment of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2013), which is dealt with in chapter 5. This documentary film deals with trials to launch rockets into space by a group of Armenian Lebanese scientists at the height of the Cold War, looking at the abrupt discontinuation of the early successful trials, their subsequent suppression in official histories, and the "what-ifs" of their imagined success. For the filmmakers, aided by animated renderings, the once-possible but unrealized future looks like a Lebanon set in a Gulf petro-city. Less about the Cold War's socialist and capitalist ideologies, or the contending politics that the modern space race has embodied, and more about the placid illusions of Lebanese nationalism, *The Lebanese Rocket Society* appears to celebrate the rocket launches by creating, "live" in the film, a monument that stands on the campus of Beirut's Haigazian University to the present day. Elias praises the film for "giving rise to an autocritical assessment of their relation to the crises of Arab modernity,"[59] without detailing and demonstrating how these lofty claims are formally actualized in the film, beyond the artists' descriptions. Elias claims that the filmmakers' monument to the space program "is not intended simply to commemorate an unheralded history. Rather, it is an attempt to put the aspirations of the past, as flawed as they might be, into productive conflict with the imperatives of the postutopian present."[60] The film, however, does not, pace Elias, engage in any concrete, or even science-fictional, speculative problematization of time, except through its dubious rendition of an upscale and ultramodern future for the city of Beirut and an all-white, slick memorial of a rocket transported anachronistically across town.

58 Ibid., 64.
59 Ibid., 164.
60 Ibid., 166.

*Posthumous Images*' nominal claims and relativist postulates can be gleaned from passages such as "These wars, with their mutating alliances, constantly shifting roster of combatants, lack of any clear victors, and competing accounts, are not amenable to conventional modes of historical analysis";[61] "The artists in this book are collectively interrogating the idea that an empiricist history of the civil war period could exist";[62] "In my account, war is not a mark of interpretive foreclosure";[63] or the Baudrillardian "They [the wars] were also in a fundamental sense conflicts waged with and over images."[64] This pastiche of references and lack of "interpretive foreclosure" enable Elias's readings of artworks to be continuous with a fragmented, even postmodern, worldview. Before they have the chance of being addressed as forms, devices, or symptoms, or of being judged according to art-historically grounded criteria, the examples discussed in the book are declared virtuous because they perform the desired collective memory function. Elias claims that "a major focus of this book concerns how politically loaded signs and symbols, circulated within the Lebanese public sphere, are part of a violent struggle over representation, one that I argue is waged with and over images as much as the constituencies that they are made to stand in for."[65] It is difficult to locate the histories of representation over which these said battles are waged, much less any roadmap for the image, film, and documentary theory (or theories) that could substantiate such claims. Elias reads the artworks discussed in each chapter in isolation from each other, so that contemporary art and poststructuralist catchphrases ("complication," "translation," "imagine a different future," "denying access to the referent," etc.) are deployed within a mishmash of theories.

What memory or politics is *Posthumous Images* speaking for, and why doesn't it have a theoretical home for its conceptions? The author refers to theorists including Gayatri Spivak, Toufic, Fredric Jameson, Wendy Brown, Etienne Balibar, Jean Baudrillard, and others, without elaborating their relevance to his subject matter (post–civil war *art* and collective *memory* politics). This means that they amount to a series of floating, sometimes antagonistic sources that appear disconnected from

61 Ibid., 5.
62 Ibid., 11.
63 Ibid., 16.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 55.

any political thread or aesthetic judgment. The book's disavowal of its own postmodern historical key—one steeped in post-history without methodological awareness of this fact—makes it questionable as a contribution to a social or critical history of art.

It is justice that has been foreclosed and infinitely postponed in Lebanon, not memorialization. If Elias had clarified that a myopic foregrounding of vague notions of collective memory and witnessing might serve as the cultural arm of human rights discourse—the valve of late capitalism's counterrevolutionary heart—*Posthumous Images* would have been a more politically compelling and accurate art-historical contribution.