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HISTORY AS AN APRIL FOOL'S JOKE. DEFAMILIARISING COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN RABIH MROUÉ'S *SO LITTLE TIME*

Summary. In the article, Rabih Mroué's performance-lecture *So Little Time* (2017) is discussed as an example of counterfactual mobilization for the purposes of political critique in contemporary art and theatre. I scrutinize Mroué's references to the modern history of Lebanon and—drawing upon a cultural analysis of this performance—discuss the artist's rendering of the instrumentalization of Lebanese collective memory by competing factions in the country's political scene. Drawing upon existing readings of Rabih Mroué's oeuvre offered by Charles Esche and Shela Sheikh, I posit that the artist reveals the arbitrary quality of the representations of the past through defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), and that his method bears an affinity to Jacques Derrida's notions of deconstruction and decolonization.

Keywords: defamiliarization, postcoloniality, memory, decolonisation, deconstruction, Rabih Mroué.

INTRODUCTION

Rabih Mroué, an acclaimed Lebanese theatre-maker, performer, and visual artist, is renowned for his lecture-performances. Most of his "lectures" are very remote from typical academic forms of address—they rely heavily on the toolkits of video art or conventional theatre and, above all, they make use of fictional narratives in lieu of orderly pedagogical discourse. *So Little Time*, one of Mroué's recent works, tells the story of Deeb Al-Assmar—a fictional doppelganger of a Lebanese war hero, Khalil Al-Jamal. Like many other of Mroué's performance-lectures, this one also relies on a counterfactual speculation about history: what if the martyr, celebrated for his commitment to the Palestinian fight for freedom, had not been seized by Israeli forces, had not died, and had been able to follow the track of history up to this day? How would the hero have approached the appropriation of his unfulfilled martyrdom in Lebanese politics? Attending to the questions posed in Mroué's work and drawing upon political readings of his performances (such as the analyses offered by Yvonne Albers, Shela Sheikh, and Charles Esche¹), I will discuss *So Little Time* in the context of Lebanese history-writing—particularly the seminal writings of Kamal Salibi—in order to demonstrate how the work

in question reflects the crisis of postcolonial statehood in Mroué's country of origin. The artist depicts this crisis through a lens of competing narratives of Lebanese collective memory, which can hardly be contained within a coherent political proposition or a linear historiographic account. Therefore, the discussed work might be read as a statement about the futility of representation politics, which remains anchored in a contractual notion of Lebanese statehood and a progressive, linear depiction of the state's development.

If history writing does serve the purpose of justifying the dominance of political elites and securing political orders, the presence of counterfactual strategies in contemporary art from the Middle East should come as no surprise. For artists like Rabih Mroué, the employment of such devices is motivated by the fact that much of the region's modern history-making has not only been modelled on Western determinist ideals but also used to justify the introduction of statehood, which stabilized and preserved the remnants of colonial order. Lebanon, Rabih Mroué's homeland, provides one of the most complex examples, since the foundational narrative of the Lebanese state relies heavily on a presupposition that the latter's emergence was not forced upon multiple sects inhabiting

the Northwest of the Arabian Plate—but, on the contrary, negotiated in a peaceful way. Mercantile culture in the area is said to have served as a “natural disposition” to dwelling in circumstances provided by liberal statehood.² It is of note that Lebanese history writing before the Civil War, which broke out in 1975, is marked by extensive use of this narrative; one of the prime examples might be found in Kamal Salibi's writings, a crucial contribution to the making of Lebanese national identity before 1967 (the year of the escalation of the country's conflict with Israel, anticipating the upheavals which followed in the next decade). As another Lebanese scholar Youssef Choueiri remarks, his older colleague's early views on Lebanese statehood and national identity relied predominantly on straightforward implementation of John Locke's political theory.³ According to Salibi, at the turn of the twentieth century all the different sects inhabiting the hills of Greater Lebanon—including Christians and Muslims of many confessions—might not have stood out “as a nation... nevertheless, they did stand out as a distinct community of sects, organized according to what has been perhaps the nearest known approximation to a Social Contract.”⁴ In other words, Salibi states that the alleged strength of modern Lebanese state was derived not from continuity of habit or religion but from general *consent* to the introduction of state structures after the colonial rule, whether this consent be overtly expressed (as in the case of Maronite Christians) or tacit (as in the case of most Muslim communities). Telling the story of a Lebanese Orthodox Christian who allegedly lost his life for the Palestinian cause in the 1960s, in *So Little Time* Rabih Mroué revisits the contractual notion of Lebanese statehood and questions other interpretations of the country's modern history that remain in conversation with the consensual narrative. In so doing, the artist challenges the postcolonial political order in Lebanon—yet does so without arriving at easy conclusions or taking clear sides with political conflicts' participants.

THE UNREAL WAR: DEPICTIONS OF DECENTRALIZED MEMORY IN LEBANON

Salibi's statement on social contract sounds just too good to the Western ear to reflect the complexities

of post-colonial state making in Lebanon. In the first three decades after Lebanon gained independence from the French Mandate it offered little support for the formation of national identity—with the exception of post-war political elites, largely made up of Maronites. Although in his seminal 1965 book, *Modern History of Lebanon*, Salibi quite straightforwardly admits that members of this sect achieved their political status thanks to willful collaboration with French officials, he goes far beyond this bland statement and provides Christian elites with an apologetic narrative which highlights the importance of their cultural heritage and praises the political talents of the group. The Maronite rise in Lebanese political scene, Salibi suggests, was inevitable—yet so was the following contestation over the legitimacy of their claims to power. While the conciliatory narrative about the emergence of Lebanese statehood, which Salibi supported, backed the isolationist politics of the country's elites, multiple other factions challenged the latter's code of conduct and put forward competing identity projects, including the trans-sectarian—and, above all, trans-national—notions of Arabism. According to these propositions, the Arab world—understood as a truly organic assemblage—could welcome not only Muslims but also Christians or atheist representatives of communist parties.⁵ What it could not accommodate, though, were the utilitarian, self-serving claims of seemingly contractual states, whereby contracts with former colonial forces could be upheld, reinstated, and kept intact as foundations of modernization programs.

The discrepancy between the politics of the state and the agendas of the manifold minorities revealed itself in the most violent way during the series of civil conflicts that ravaged Lebanon between 1975 and 1990. Besides hindering the peacemaking process, the proliferation of disparate identity projects during the war resulted in a radical decentralization of collective memory in the country. Since it produced an array of competing historical narratives as well as visual archives, it also became a vital theme of Lebanese art. From the 1970s onwards, artists of Lebanese origin—such as Lina Tabbara, Nada Sahnaoui or, more recently, Mounira al Solh—have

used the archives of conflict to produce critical artworks which reflect the radical atomization of the public sphere in Lebanon. Many of Rabih Mroué's performative works reflect his long-standing interest in the subtleties of the sectarian organization of Lebanese public life. The dramaturgy of his pivotal 2000 performance, *Three Posters* (written together with Elias Khoury), was based on a film recording of the testimony that Jamal Al-Sati, a Lebanese soldier of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, gave a few hours before his politically motivated suicide.⁶ The video was aired on Lebanese public television in 1985, causing a nation-wide sensation and paving the way for other martyrological representations, which rapidly infected the visual field of Lebanese memory.⁷ In *Three Posters*, Mroué and Khoury repeatedly rewrote and restaged Al Sati's testimony, each time giving emphasis to different details from the martyr's briefly recounted past, such as his family background or involvement in the Communist Party of Lebanon—details which complicate the stereotypical image of a fighter for the Palestinian cause. In 2001 the performance was presented in front of American audiences—yet, after 9/11, the artists decided to cancel their tour, fearing a general misapprehension of the work's political message. The topic of the performance was all too easily relatable to the attack on the World Trade Center—even though the identification of Jamal Al Sati's suicide with an expression of Muslim fundamentalism had been precisely what the authors wanted to avoid in the piece by clearly identifying the protagonist as a communist. Many Western viewers—including art critics—could not account for the fact that Islamist anti-modernism is but one option in a vast array of pro-Palestinian or pro-Arab identities which resulted from Lebanon's long-standing conflict with Israel and the isolationist politics of the country's postcolonial elites. Challenging the simplified view of Lebanese politics, Mroué and Khoury aimed to present Al-Sati's story as an exemplar of this proliferation—however, their efforts were unsuccessful.

Although Mroué failed to avoid misunderstanding of identitarian themes in *Three Posters*, he did not give up on discussing cross-sectarian politics in Lebanon in his next performances. On the contrary,

he developed a strategy of juxtaposing conflicting representations of Lebanon's recent past, amplifying the effect of estrangement which already marked the renderings of Jamal Al-Sati's suicidal testimony in the 2001 piece. The protagonists of his more recent performances, still bearing close resemblance to real figures of Lebanese history, are forced to question their political choices or decide to defend them in spite of all odds. Whatever their trajectories are, their identities eventually turn out to be arbitrary constructs, contingent on socio-political circumstances. In pieces like his widely acclaimed *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke*, many different identities clash with each other.⁸ In this 2007 performance, Mroué juxtaposed a few pseudo-autobiographical stories narrated by fighters of the Lebanese Civil War who—once killed off in battle—left their tombs and reentered the scene of Lebanese history as “living dead”. Their accounts of historical events are conflicting and rife with inner contradictions. Keeping track of political events from the perspective of resurrected warriors turns out to be quite challenging for the protagonists.

In works such as *How Nancy Wished*, Mroué reveals deficiencies of all presented accounts and abstains from taking sides with any of the figures. In fact, his performances render the isolationist politics of the Lebanese state, the Arabic claims to organic trans-sectarian solidarity, and—last but not least—the legitimacy of radical antimodernist formations (narrowing the field of solidarity down to “Islamic brotherhood”) altogether untenable. In light of the civil conflicts between 1975 and 1990, none of the narratives seems to hold enough interpretive power to give an exhaustive account of the origin of the social upheaval. Mroué's reluctance to take sides with any of the participants of the war tells a lot about the general landscape of Lebanese collective memory. As social theorist Sune Haugbolle remarks, “interpretations of the series of conflicts that ravaged Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 vary dramatically in popular, official and academic renderings.”⁹ He further argues that “the moment the war was over, for many it suddenly felt unreal, as if it were a...part of a film.”¹⁰ On the one hand, Haugbolle's filmic comparison accentuates the distance to the

cinematic image, experienced after leaving the black box of cinema. This sensation reminds of the difficulty with retroactive explanation of traumatic events. On the other hand, one can read this metaphorical expression as a reference to the technique of montage, thanks to which a film can combine multiple points of view. Hence, indirectly, the figure can be regarded as indicative of the decentralized quality of Lebanese memory.

Taking the “cinematic” quality of collective remembering in Lebanon into account, one should not wonder that actual movies, theatrical performances, or works of contemporary art are constantly fabricated from traces of social memory. Lebanese artists question not only the “what” but also—if not primarily—“the who” of historical narratives circulating in the collective consciousness of the nation. The shattered collective remembrance of the Lebanese Civil War (as well as later historical events like the Intifadas) serves as a reservoir of narratives and images that can be dissected and rearranged into unexpected orders. Sometimes they bring consolation to excluded groups—yet often the resulting “collages” reflect the overpowering sense of absurdity that charges the actual memories of Lebanese people. Reflecting on this sense of estrangement, Rabih Mroué’s works are indeed collages of contradicting narratives that originate in fragmented collective memories of the war. Symptomatically, the Lebanese author has also become known for his photographic manipulations—one of his shows at a Hamburg-based gallery Sfeir Semmler had a poignant title: *I was fortunate not to have seen what the other have witnessed*.¹¹ Just like the title of the aforementioned performance from 2007, this aphoristic phrase is charged with overtones of bitter irony. In the end—however comforting temporal distance from traumatic events might be—the exhibition did deal in depth with testimonies given by eponymous “others”; these references seem unavoidable, as if, despite the distance, one could not simply free oneself from his or her burden. Instead, one can browse, dissect, and reconfigure the archives in order to make them more legible (perhaps running the risk of sectarian re-appropriations of war memory) or, as in Mroué’s case, deconstruct them, providing space

for alternative interpretations of historical events and emergence of “unorthodox”, complex subjectivities. A hallmark strategy of archival appropriation in Rabih Mroué’s performances—exemplified by both *Three Posters* and *How Nancy Wished*—consists in populating para-documentary settings with doppelgangers of historical heroes, who often find their own reflections—or “reversals”—in other protagonists. The artist traces typical characters in various tales about Lebanon’s past and reveals the constructedness of historical figures (typical features of biographies of martyrs and other heroes) through their juxtaposition. This enables Mroué to counterfactually replay the past and remix competing archives of Lebanese memory. Rooted in deconstruction, the aim of this strategy is to dismantle metaphysical closures inherent in discourses of collective memory. As the artist himself remarks in one of the multiple interviews that he gave to European and American press, memory, “whether it is personal or collective and whether it is written in a history book or preserved in an archive, I perceive...as a very violent act because of always being selective.”¹² No narrative holds absolute descriptive power—no map, no panorama, and no book of political history can present the whole world “as it was” or is.

What makes Mroué’s deconstructive strategies unique is their resemblance to the literary device which the Russian structuralist Viktor Shklovsky once termed *defamiliarization*. For Shklovsky, the strategy in question consists in presenting the most ordinary, everyday objects or events from unusual perspectives—so as to take things out of their static environment and to reanimate what was once subject to naturalizing, reifying, and unifying perception (or, to put it more generally, what is taken for granted or passes unnoticed as “ordinary” or “obvious”).¹³ In Mroué’s works, though, it is not material objects but history and identities that become reanimated in this manner. Showing disturbing events in Lebanese history from the perspective of the “living dead” in *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool’s Joke* is a prime example of this strategy. The artist developed it further in his recent performance entitled *So Little Time* (2016; produced in collaboration with two

Berlin-based institutions, the Freie Universität in Berlin and Hebbel am Ufer theatre). Since the performance might be perceived as a “clasp” in Mroué’s multi-directional practice (touching upon leitmotifs of his oeuvre or employing characteristic staging techniques) and relates directly to the problems of mythologizing history writing that I highlighted at the beginning of my paper, I consider it worthwhile to provide an extensive commentary on this challenging work.

PERFORMING MARTYRDOM IN MROUÉ’S *SO LITTLE TIME*

Just like the heroes of Mroué’s 2007 piece, the singular protagonist of his later performance—Deeb Al-Asmar—is a resurrected dead warrior. As I have already mentioned, his story is modelled on one of the commando Khalil Al-Jamal, known as the first Lebanese martyr who sacrificed his life for the Palestinian cause. However, Mroué speculates that a story celebrating such an act of martyrdom could have begun even before Al-Jamal’s body was transferred from Jordan to his homeland in 1968. To this end, Mroué invents a fictional character who turns out to be taken for a martyr by dire mistake—the body buried in his tomb could have belonged to one of many Lebanese warriors who joined Palestinian fedayeen before the outbreak of the internal conflict in the country, yet it was not his. Having come back to Lebanon in full glory after being released from an Israeli detention camp, Deeb Al-Asmar testifies to the complexities of local politics, after he was wrongly assumed dead. In Mroué’s one-hour performance—divided into three sections—fictional mass media accounts, records from annals, and the protagonist’s personal confessions alternately support and contradict each other, while the audience is being presented with a series of photographs that gradually dissolve in a water tank, having been placed there by the solitary performer-storyteller Lina Majdalanie (Mroué’s long-term collaborator). Many of the images feature the woman herself, accompanied by a mature man whom the audience might take for Deeb himself. Catering to the viewers’ assumption that they are watching a factual account of past events, Mroué establishes

a documentary pact with the them but challenges and reinstates it over and over again, throughout the entire performance. In the performance’s third part, the female narrator herself assumes the role of the living martyr, delivering his fabricated confessions in direct speech. The artifice of Deeb’s story discloses itself throughout the performance, mostly through comical depictions of the character that always reflect the defamiliarization of his self-awareness (e.g. when Deeb loses consciousness after having faced a statue erected to honor his heroism).

In *So Little Time*, the fictional story of the living martyr derives its political resonance from Deeb’s Christian upbringing; as the audience is told, in the 1960s he, despite being baptized, joined the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. When the protagonist leaves a detention camp and comes back to Lebanon, he is welcomed by “the sounds of church bells” that “blend with the voices of minarets”, and in unison “compose the melody of martyrdom.”¹⁴ Reminiscent of the historical burial of the commando Khalil Al-Jamal, this scene is not only a celebration of the martyr himself but also of cross-sectarian solidarity—as if the foundational myth at the core of Lebanon’s consensual statehood was not only true but also generative (i.e., as if historians like Kamal Salibi did succeed in the task of inventing an identity for a nation veritably bound by a firm social contract).¹⁵ Having seen a large statue of him in one of the main squares in Beirut and hearing the polyphonic “melody of martyrdom”, Deeb Al-Asmar becomes filled with a sense “of pride, dignity and a sense of belonging”, of “belonging to an Arab Lebanon.”¹⁶ Yet this mythology of the Lebanese state does not remain unchallenged. When the Civil War breaks out a few years later, Deeb has no choice but to challenge his own identification with the Lebanese people as an organic entity and faces a proliferation of radical and reactionary identities on all sides of the conflict. During the story that spans almost fifty years, the protagonist, due to his investment in the idea of solidarity with Arabs, ends up in prison, is publicly scorned, and even suffers a mental breakdown. None of these predicaments, however, prevent Deeb from keeping his fixed idea, which is to attain the most “organic” expression of Lebanese identity.

During the fifty years of his peripeteias, Deeb discovers that the supposedly organic expressions are heavily dependent on political circumstances, while the notion of representation is never static. His *anagnorisis* begins in Yasser Arafat's office, where Deeb was invited right after his glorious return to Beirut, so that the leader of the country can thank him for the engagement in the fight for free Palestine and also warn him that his heroic deeds can be easily instrumentalized. Referring to the statue that the Lebanese state erected in Deeb's honor, Arafat reminds him:

Brother Deeb, at the end of the day, we are all a project of martyrs. But if you want my opinion, this statue should be destroyed. Because this statue does not represent Palestine, nor does it represent the Palestinian cause, not even Arabism. This sculpture only represents the Lebanese right-wing and its isolationist project. The Lebanese state erected it to confiscate our cause¹⁷.

According to Arafat, the chiming of church bells, resounding in unison with muezzins' calls for prayer during Deeb's burial, is a sound of a political promise that the Lebanese elites cannot fulfill, reluctant to openly offend Israeli authorities and firmly supporting isolationist agenda. The search for a true expression of commitment to the Palestinian cause and pan-Arabic solidarity requires distrust towards the official politics in Lebanon. Taken aback by historical contingencies and feeling estranged, Deeb attempts to find the right formula for this engagement from the perspective of a living martyr. Sometimes Mroué represents this quest in a heavily stereotypical and grotesque way—for example, when Deeb rejects the legacy of his father because "a true Arab cannot be a merchant" (it is of note that the historian Kamal Salibi praised not only the political charisma of the Maronite sect but also their experience in trade as prerequisites for building the contractual Lebanese state)¹⁸. At other times, the living martyr's story becomes quite disturbing. To live as an "authentic" supporter of the Arab cause, Deeb has to reconstruct his identity numerous times—if in 1968 "authentic" engagement could be

expressed in terms of organic solidarity between Muslims, Christians, and communists, three decades later it required at least a tacit alliance with radical Muslim organizations, such as Hezbollah.

Deeb Al-Asmar's pursuit of "authentic" engagement in the political life of his country—perceived as a *sui generis* Arabic state—is the core theme of *So Little Time*. The performance gains a truly tragicomic momentum when Deeb recognizes that there is nothing more fictional than authenticity and, nevertheless, makes a conscious choice to remain a "living martyr" and fashion his life into a monument, cast in flesh and blood. Watching his statue being torn down as Lebanese authorities retreat from supporting the notion of "Arab Lebanon", he asks himself: "If this man whom they've erected this statue for were really to die, would I cry for him? Or would I complete his path for him? Would I go back to fighting? Am I ready to be captured again and be tortured in the jails of the Zionist enemy?"¹⁹ As Deeb's doubts grow, his confidence is shaken, and he starts to question the solid foundations of his own identity, arriving at the conclusion "that the story of his martyrdom was nothing but an illusion. And his statue was nothing but a small part of bigger illusions competing against each other."²⁰ To the audience's surprise, though, Deeb decides to continue his fight for "Arab Lebanon" in spite of all odds. Paradoxically, for Deeb, the moment of disillusionment becomes the very moment of individuation. His self-defining choice is expressed as a bet: "He thought: They made me a legend, despite myself. And then they threw me among all these legends fighting each other. Either I die, or I live."²¹

In view of the passage quoted above, one might feel tempted to interpret "death" as subjection to reifying political narratives (or as Deeb's consent to remain a mythical creature instead of becoming a "real" human). Yet, life does not necessarily mean the exact opposite of this subjection, that is, political escapism or radical emancipation from the objectifying mythical framework. Choosing life, Deeb decides to partly accept the instrumentalization of his personal story within the self-contradictory political discourse and, taking the latter's incongruity and polyphony as a given, to fashion his life

according to a set of values that he regards his own mythical personage to be founded on. Here, the fictive aspect of his identity allows his mythologized “I” to have a future and—once endowed with flesh and blood anew—to become a radical existential project. The story of a living martyr no longer writes itself alone: now it opens up to the possibility of being filled up and fulfilled by Deeb Al-Asmar. Instead of passively accepting an imposed identity of a martyr, Deeb starts to *simulate* it—converting to Islam and joining Hezbollah, as *any* respectable living martyr for the Palestinian cause would do in his opinion. Here, simulation consists in a “futu-ring” that acknowledges the existence of history’s mythical source in a deterministic manner, although, paradoxically, to make simulation possible, the source must remain intangible and uncertain. To live as a “true martyr”, Deeb had to fail to become an actual—that is, dead—one.

The living martyr’s simulation of his martyrological selfhood should not be mistaken for deception: in fact, the notion of “honest speech” or “sincere action” cancels out the very possibility of simulating a persona like Deeb’s. The criteria of truth-telling (or rather, truth-doing) that the protagonist embraces stay beyond the register of factual fidelity. Facing a mobile army of allegories—and having seen his own life being turned into one of them—he tries not to communicate what history was really like but, rather, to rescue his moral integrity from contradictions and turns that obscure the political discourse and emerging narratives about the past. It is from such integrity—from virtue—that he derives a sense of being “truthful”: a “true hero”, a “true martyr”. As the audience of *So Little Time* is told by the storyteller Lina Majdalanie, Deeb “would mix things up, sometimes he spoke of himself in the third person ‘he,’ sometimes in the first ‘I,’ sometimes he was a captive, sometimes he was a martyr, and he always would end with: ‘And here I am today, the living martyr.’”²² Even the protagonist’s personal tale might be recounted in numerous ways, on condition that it remains a story of loyalty to the idea of Arab Lebanon. It is not from “the matter of fact” that authenticity emerges but from loyalty to an idea. Accepting his martyrological persona, Deeb takes a decisionist “leap of faith”.

As Shela Sheikh suggests, Rabih Mroué’s works, in which political martyrdom belongs to the most frequently recurring motifs, reveal that “the meaning of martyrdom is inherently testimonial, insofar as it can only ever be promised and believed, rather than [remain] stable and assured.”²³ Sheikh grounds her argument in the analysis of *Three Posters*, though it could just as well refer to *So Little Time*, whose protagonist, taken aback by the cult surrounding his own martyrdom-non-martyrdom, decides to invest in the promise that the very possibility of his death carried—that of heroism and virtue. This leap of faith must find its confirmation in the continuous praxis of life. In *So Little Time*, Deeb Al Asmar’s martyrdom is shown as an ongoing performance, while the living martyr constantly has to face the lack of felicity as a condition for his performative acts. Deeb’s incapacity to live up to the myth of his own heroic sacrifice amid various socio-political contingencies imbues Mroué’s piece with tragicomic overtones. *So Little Time* is, at the bottom, a tale of a man who cannot accept his limited influence on the way his actions are perceived by others, which makes the work humorous and appealing to non-Lebanese audiences (who can regard Deeb’s story as a tale about more general existential problems).

WHO ARE “THE PEOPLE”? DEFAMILIARIZATION AS A DECOLONIAL STRATEGY

To the extent that the discussed work remains concerned with Deeb’s self-creation, the lecture-performance might be interpreted—at least from a perspective that smacks of Eurocentrism—as a parody of the romantic ideal of virtuous life, described by Isaiah Berlin as a “means of conscious myth-making.”²⁴ Like a true romantic, Deeb Al-Asmar fashions his life into an art project, a motif emphasized by Deeb’s raising his own statues once the original monument is demolished or by his appearance as “a living statue” at a contemporary art gallery. Although such scenes might seem very flippant when staged in an actual theatre, a much deeper sense of irony emerges from the fact that the protagonist’s self-creation mirrors that of the Lebanese nation. In a way, Deeb finds himself

in the position of a history-maker who—not unlike Kamal Salibi—tries to provide a sense of integrity to ongoing political events, partly accepting the narratives he is provided with by politicians and partly assembling a narrative on his own. However, his task is very tricky. Firstly, Deeb falls victim to fetishization of organic solidarity that becomes untenable in the aftermath of historical events. Secondly, the “great images of the great society of the dead and the living” that inspire Deeb’s grand project turn out to be subservient to the politics of representation that evades the protagonist’s efforts at control. In Mroué’s *So Little Time*, the romantic ideal of virtuous life is played out against itself along with the belief in organic emergence of political alliances.

The tension between the constructivist notion of identity and the idea of virtue in *So Little Time* mirrors the very tension between historical determinism and the narrative of social contract that pervades Lebanese history writing. In historical narratives, the images of a great society made up of peacefully coexisting sects and these of “the great society of the dead and the living” (in which the former ultimately gain determining power over the latter) could not coexist peacefully. In pre-war writings of Christian writers and statesmen—such as Michel Chiha or Kamal Salibi himself—the deterministic argument that concerns the emergence of Lebanese modern statehood reaches as far back as antiquity²⁵; the mythmakers traced the ancestry of the Maronites to Phoenician culture and suggests that their rise to the forefront of Lebanese political scene was inevitable. In so doing, they engaged directly in postcolonial politics of representation and introduced a notion of historical necessity that might seem to contradict the narrative about the contractual emergence of the Lebanese state. Their praise of Maronites’ charisma (and the mythologization of their ancestry) was inserted right into the gap that opened up between the notion of Lebanese statehood as founded on social contract and an array of disparate sectarian identities. Trying to bridge this gap, Christian spokesmen introduced two aspects of Western modernity into Lebanese history writing: on one hand, they naturalized the liberal statehood in Lebanon; on the other hand,

they backed the liberal narrative with a notion of historical continuity which justifies the political dominance of a minoritarian elite.²⁶ Both arguments could not have been verified in a more violent way than the long Civil War. While the former line of historical argumentation could not provide many Lebanese people with an organic sense of identity, the latter backed isolationist tendencies in the country and sparked internal antagonisms that survived during many following decades. As Sune Haugbølle remarks in her *War and Memory and Lebanon*, wartime traumas “have provided ruptures in the postcolonial emancipatory modernizing self-understanding of states and leaderships.”²⁷ Yet, after the Civil War, these very ruptures did not become easily filled with new identity formations. In fact, Lebanese people remained in a state of perpetual confusion and self-doubt. After the war broke out in 1975, even Kamal Salibi felt challenged to alter his pre-war account of the emergence of the Lebanese state and yet was unable to provide any alternative story. Instead, he engaged in meta-historical reflection.²⁸ This shift is symptomatic of the dramatic fragmentation that has marked Lebanese self-consciousness.

Mroué’s works might be approached as exercises in meta-history as well. The metahistorical layer of *So Little Time* emerges straight out of Mroué’s rendition of the protagonist’s existential struggles. Their stake is no less than a sense of belonging, the political corollary of any historical representation that preempts an individual’s relationship with “the people”—an inevitably invented community—whose task is to secure recently instated statehood or to dismantle its impromptu arrangement. All the representations of “the Lebanese” or “the Arab” people that Deeb has to face oscillate around failures of postcolonial political order in Lebanon—and all of them compensate for the breakdowns by providing deterministic perspectives on the state’s past and future, wherein the roles of heroes and victims, owners and disowned, innocent and corrupted are always assigned preemptively. Defamiliarising Al Asmar’s self-perception, Mroué renders such narratives fallacious and ossifying. Whether attending to the nationalist narratives of the Lebanese modern

state or the radical responses to the former, Mroué acknowledges that neither affirmative nor reactive politics can account for the actual proliferation of identities in a sectarian society like the Lebanese. No “people” understood as a static singularity can claim ownership of the country’s past—nor of the country’s future (unless yet another series of conflicts should ravage the very possibility of cross-sectarian agreement). According to a curator Charles Esche, Mroué’s works target “one of the most persistent of modern images, that of the arrow of time shooting out of the present in a predetermined direction that must lead to improvement, development and justice.”²⁹ As the artist attends to the foundational narratives of the modern state, this “arrow” might be understood as the arrow of progress leading to modernization. Yet the same holds good for more “circular” notions of historical determinism, which explain socio-political trajectories in terms of return to imagined roots of a given community. If, as Esche suggests, Rabih Mroué’s ideological position can be discussed in terms of decolonization, the artist shows that this process cannot come to fruition through a simple negation of modernist agendas. To use an expression of Jacques Derrida, decolonization occurs “neither according to the simple mode of reappropriation nor that of opposition and reversal”; just like deconstruction, it remains a “never-ending process.”³⁰ Decolonizing a country, a culture, or a collective memory requires a “third space”, a third trajectory—or, rather, a multiplicity of parallel routes—and a readiness to accept that no attempt at representation can satisfy all the “people”, represented in ever reductionist ways.

The storyline of *So Little Time* might be situated in the political realm of modern Lebanon, yet the political resonance of the work is by no means limited to its local context. Denouncing the national mythology of Lebanon and creating a quixotic persona of Deeb Al-Asmar, Rabih Mroué simultaneously challenges two fundamental tenets of Western modernity: firstly, the belief in consensual state-making and the liberal state; secondly, the determinist notion of history. Taking this into account, we might perceive Deeb Al-Asmar as a figure of failed decolonization, constantly threatened by the possibility of

fundamentalist tendencies and misguided by revolutionary, utopian projects. The irony that pervades Mroué’s playful employment of counterfactual storytelling prevents the audience from finding easy consolation in his performance, while Al-Asmar’s ill fate functions as a warning. At the same time, in the Lebanese artist’s performance, decolonization is represented as an ultimately unresolvable process. There are no rights and wrongs—only openings and closures. History and political agendas can never be written down. They must always be re-written.

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Notes

- ¹ Yvonne Albers, "The Empty Chair: On the Politics of Spectatorial Situatedness in the Performances of Rabih Mroué" in *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s*, ed. Friederike Pannewick, Georges Khalil (Wiesbaden: Dr Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2015), p. 317–332; Shela Sheikh, *I am the martyr (x). Philosophical Reflections of Testimony and Martyrdom* (PhD diss., Goldsmiths, 2013), <http://research.gold.ac.uk/8039/>; Charles Esche, *Absences Felt and Unfelt*, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/32679893/the_recent_History_of_the_Van_Abbemuseum_Eindhoven_NL.
- ² Cf. Kamal Salibi, *Modern History of Lebanon* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965); Carolyn Gates, *Merchant Republic of Lebanon: Rise of an Open Economy* (Oxford, London: Centre for Lebanese Studies and I B Tauris, 1998).
- ³ Youssef Choueiri, *Modern Arab Historiography: Historical Discourse and the Nation-State* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 159–160.
- ⁴ Salibi, *Modern History of Lebanon*, p. 28.
- ⁵ Mroué stresses the importance of this notion for his own understanding of Lebanese politics in the interview for the online magazine *Schau ins Blau*: Rabih Mroué, interviewed by Sabine Wirth and Eike Schamburek. *Schau ins Blau*, 22 Apr 2011. <https://www.schauinsblau.de/?article=rabih-mroue>.
- ⁶ Rabih Mroué, Elias Khoury, *Three Posters*, first performed at Ayloul Festival, Beirut 2000.
- ⁷ Discussed in Albers, p. 318–321.
- ⁸ Rabih Mroué, Fadi Toufiq, *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke*, first performed at Tokyo International Arts Festival, Tokio 2007.
- ⁹ Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rabih Mroué, *I was fortunate not to have seen what the other have witnessed*, Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg, February 11, 2016 – April 23, 2016.

¹² Rabih Mroué, interviewed by Göksu Kunak. *The Theatre Times*, 13 Feb. 2017. <https://thetheatretimes.com/interview-rabih-mroue-micro-narratives-immediacy-time-audience-perception/>.

¹³ Cf. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon, Marion J. Reis (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

¹⁴ All quotes from *So Little Time* in this article come from the transcript that Rabih Mroué and Sfeir Semler Gallery in Hamburg kindly shared with the author. Further as *So Little Time*.

¹⁵ Cf. David Hirst, *Beware of Small States. Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988); Farid El-Khazen, *Breakdown of the State in Lebanon, 1967–1976*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁶ *So Little Time*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Sheikh, p. 15.

²⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 122.

²⁵ Cf. Asher Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia: The Search for Identity in Lebanon* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris 2014); Kais Firro, *Inventing Lebanon: Nationalism and the State under the Mandate* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris 2003), p. 15–41; Choueiri, p. 132.

²⁶ Compare this account with the chapter *Kamal Salibi and the History of Lebanon: the Making of a Nation?* in Choueiri, p. 125–173.

²⁷ Haugbolle, p. 6.

²⁸ Cf. Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988).

²⁹ Esche, p. 4.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Du droit à la philosophie*, (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1990), p. 160–161. Translated by the author.

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ISTORIJA TARSI BALANDŽIO PIRMOSIOS POKŠTAS. KOLEKTYVINĖS ATMINTIES DEFAMILIARIZACIJA RABIH MROUÉ PERFORMANSE „SO LITTLE TIME“ („TIEK MAŽAI LAIKO“)

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje Rabih Mroué performansas – paskaita „So Little Time“ („Tiek mažai laiko“, 2017) – aptariamas kaip neįgyvendintos kontr(a)faktinės mobilizacijos pavyzdys, skirtas politinei kritikai šiuolaikiniame mene ir teatre. Straipsnio autorius, taikydamas kultūrinę performanso analizę, tiria Mroué aliuzijas apie šiuolaikinę Libano istoriją, diskutuoja ir aptaria menininko, kuris meta iššūkį šalies politinei sistemai, pasmerkimą instrumentalizacijai kolektyvinėje Libano atmintyje. Tiriant ir analizuojant išlikusius Rabih Mroué kūrinius, kuriuos pabrėžia Charlesas Esche ir Shela Sheikh, straipsnio autorius postuluoja, kad menininkas, pasitelkdamas defamiliarizaciją*, atskleidžia prieštaringas praeities reprezentacijas ir joms būdingus bruožus. Autorius taip pat pabrėžia, kad jo taikomas metodas turi sąsają ir yra giminingas Jacques'o Derrida teiginiams apie dekonstrukciją ir dekolonizaciją.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: defamiliarizacija, postkolonializmas, atmintis, dekolonizacija, dekonstrukcija, Rabih Mroué.

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* Defamiliarizacija – sudėtingas įprastų dalykų reprezentavimas, kuriuo siekiama paskatinti įprastų reikšmių ir veiksmų suvokimą.