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# Image

How Images Survive (in) Theatre

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*The Pixelated Revolution* and *Three Posters*

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# How Images Survive (in) Theatre:
# On the Lives of Images in Rabih Mroué's
# *The Pixelated Revolution* and *Three Posters*

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*Abstract: This article analyses two theatre pieces by Rabih Mroué as statements and reflections about how images work. "The Pixelated Revolution" (2012) and "Three Posters" (2000) are lecture-performances that probe the power of images in the context of war. Both performances use images "on the brink" of death, the first showing gripping footage from demonstrators in the Syrian civil war and the latter integrating a real video testimony of a Lebanese suicide bomber into the theatre piece. These precarious images between life and death are used to theorise the image in an alternative way. Specifically, Mroué stages the image as self-critical metapictures, as has been theorized by W. J. T. Mitchell. Furthermore, Mroué treats the images as if they were actors, as if they had a life, a death, and ghostly (re)appearances of their own. This relates to Mitchell's later approach, looking at images as living organisms. If images are alive, what lives do they lead, both within and beyond the theatre?*

*Keywords: Theatre, W. J. T. Mitchell, Martyrdom, Metapictures, Picture as Living Organism*

## Introduction

Rabih Mroué is a Lebanese actor, playwright, and artist working on the boundary between theatre, performance, and visual art. His artistic body of work is formally diverse, consisting of numerous theatre performances, films, documentaries, photographs, and installations. Yet, his work is remarkably consistent with respect to content, as Mroué repeatedly engages with the recent violent history and local politics of his homeland, Lebanon, and with broader issues regarding the geopolitical conflicts in the Middle East. Although presentations of his work in Lebanon have become rare, due to stricter regulations and increased censorship, Mroué belongs to the most innovative and celebrated artists of the country (Wilson-Goldie 2007). The fact that most of his recent work has been developed in and for international venues, museums, and theatre festivals around the globe, gives the impression that Mroué has become an artist in exile: internationally renowned for his critical performances, but looked at with suspicion by the political leaders in his homeland.

This distrust is partly grounded in the recurring but tricky themes that crystallise in his oeuvre, including martyrdom, war, death, and sense of community. But more than that, the Lebanese censors are critical toward the semi-documentary aesthetic strategy of his work, as it combines real events and personal anecdotes with made-up stories and fictitious elements. This combination is so intricate, that it becomes impossible to distinguish between truth and lie, between reality and fiction. Although Mroué's goal is explicitly *not* to (re)write history, unwary audiences might have the impression that the performances are historically provocative, probably enforced by Mroué's extensive use of archival materials and the format of the lecture-performance.[2] As such, Mroué's performances present themselves as documentary theatre, in which historical documents and photographs are shown and discussed (cf. Peleg and Bruzzi

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[2] The lecture-performances is an artistic format that was first used by performance artists like Chris Burden, Robert Morris, and Joseph Beuys in the second half of the twentieth century (Milder 2011, 13). The format has become very popular in contemporary theatre, as it brings together art and education, mostly criticising institutional, representational, or artistic practices. Mroué refers to his lecture-performances as "non-academic lectures."

2012, 47–48). However, Mroué's interest lays not so much in what is true or false, but rather in the processes of how truth and history are generated through representational practices. Mroué's work is a statement and reflection about how images work; more than that, it is preoccupied with particular semi-documentary stories and the, sometimes powerful, emotions they provoke. Mroué, in fact, uses the lecture-performance as a meta-theatrical tool to examine the representational value of images, to probe their power in the context of war, and to self-critically investigate the role of theatre.

The following article shows how the dichotomy between truth and falsehood is somewhat misplaced, as Mroué's performances in the first instance engage with the role of images in the process of generating meaning (which can, for its part, be true or false, or a bit of both). The article considers two works that each in their own way scrutinise images of life and death in the context of violent conflict. Specifically, we will look at Mroué's *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012), a lecture-performance that premiered in New York in 2012. In the performance, Mroué discusses a variety of low-quality cell phone videos of the Syrian Resistance, uploaded on YouTube as a protest and weapon against the state violence committed by the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad in 2011. Some of the video material shows the civil war in its crudest form, for example the footage of a sniper being filmed by a protester, who subsequently aims his rifle at the camera man and shoots him. The video documents the gripping and lethal moment of eye contact between the camera man and his killer. The peculiar tension between life and death provides the images with a self-referentiality that transforms the camera and its images in weapons of resistance. Furthermore, we will look at the precarious lives these images can lead. Secondly, we will look at *Three Posters* (2000), a performance in which Mroué engages with three different takes of the video testimony of a Lebanese resistance fighter before his suicide attack. The performance questions the image politics of this particular tradition of video testimonies, which is again characterised by a particular tension between life and death (the martyr announces his imminent death while still being alive). Here, the image functions as a promise of eternal life and as a death threat at the same time. We will evaluate the complicated temporality of the video itself and its integration in Mroué's theatre performance, problematizing the putative stability of images. Generally, both cases engage with the themes of life and death quite explicitly, presenting crisis situations in which the living die, or in which the dead *still* speak, or even come to life again. As such, life and death are not dealt with in a literal sense as extreme opposites, but rather as blurry states that fade into one another. In this sense, Mroué predominantly deals with ghostly presence and absence.

Importantly, the performances are not only reflections about martyrdom and death, but also about the role images play in contemporary visual culture, both in the Middle East, in the West, and across the globe. Mroué's work shows that images are not merely passive objects to be looked at, but that they have a performativity of their own; images play *roles* much like actors on the theatre stage. Also Maaike Bleeker (2012, 198) notices this theatralisation of the image in Mroué's work: "Mroué puts images on stage in a way that quite literally turns them into actors. He interacts with them and makes space for their performativity to emerge and become part of the performance, to indeed become the performance itself. More than that, his performances suggest that images themselves may be understood as a kind of stage; a stage that does not precede what we see but emerges from how we perceive." This article questions what roles Mroué's images get to play and how they relate to the complex themes of death and martyrdom. In this endeavour, we will use two key concepts of W. J. T. Mitchell, one of the initiators of the field of visual studies in the 1990s. His concept of the metapicture (1994) will prove useful to consider how Rabih Mroué creates self-critical images that question their own role as mediators, both within and outside the theatre. In other words: Mroué's images investigate processes of representation. Moreover, we will look at how Mroué theorises the image in an alternative way (cf. Bleeker 2012, 188), by treating them *as if* they were actors, *as if* they had a life, a death and ghostly (re)appearances of their own. This relates to the approach that W. J. T. Mitchell

developed in *What Do Pictures Want* (2005), looking at images as living organisms. If images are alive, what lives do they lead, within and beyond the theatre?

## Images on the Brink of Death: *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012)

In 2011, a wave of public protest surprised incumbent leaders in the Middle East and world leaders and audiences alike. Initiated in Tunisia, the upheavals rapidly spread throughout the Middle East under the name "Arab Spring" and led to the deposition of numerous governments in the region, most famously in Tunisia and Egypt. When the unrest also spread to Syria, it grew into a violent conflict quickly when civil protests were violently suppressed by the regime of sitting president Bashar al-Assad. The civil war that ensued between different parties is still ongoing until this day. Cities like Homs and Aleppo were transformed into the frontline of a back-and-forth guerrilla war between opposition forces and the Syrian army. Journalists were immediately banned from the conflict zone, while the regime waged a cruel war against resistance fighters, protesters, and civilians alike. With independent journalism short-circuited and the state media one-sidedly reporting the perspective of the regime, Syrian activists developed a *cinema of resistance*; "a vast, disorganized, popular, and free archive of revolutionary acts that have been recorded and uploaded to the Internet" (Valderrama 2016). The blurry and oftentimes fragmented videos of protests, (chemical) bombings, and killings are recorded with mobile phones and disseminated and shared through online video platforms like YouTube and social media like Twitter. Their veracity is usually next to impossible to corroborate. As Carol Martin mentions: "The internet is not fact-checked, no sources are verified, there is no governing ethical code of reportage or information. It is subject to hacking, its images are unauthored and unauthorized" (quoted in Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin 2012, 22). Still, these videos have become valuable source material for both human rights organisations and international media to counter the official narrative of the Syrian state apparatus. Indeed, in the day and age of smartphones, in which every mobile phone user is a potential photographer or cameraman, ready at all times to document and circulate information, it becomes difficult for repressive regimes to silence dissidents and operate in the shadows.

The Syrian cinema of resistance provided Rabih Mroué with a rich archive to investigate a sentence which he encountered coincidentally: "The Syrian protesters are recording their own deaths" (Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin 2012, 25). *The Pixelated Revolution* inquires into death in Syria today, digging deep into the images from the war zone that reach us through the internet.[3] The lecture-performance is partly a presentation of the footage that he found during his research, partly a gripping and thought-provoking reflection on the role of images in violent conflicts.

In the first part, Mroué develops a fictional list of recommendations on how to record manifestations and document state violence. The list is, however, only partly fictional, as Mroué uses real instructions and suggestions from Syrian activists shared on social media. Interestingly, the list is developed in close dialogue with Dogme 95, the cinematographic manifesto of Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. Some of the recommendations are taken directly from the Dogme 95 "Vow of Chastity":[4]

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[3] Like much of Mroué's work, *The Pixelated Revolution* originated as a lecture-performance, but has also been adapted into a video installation and as such exhibited in numerous international exhibits and art festivals. The video installation of *The Pixelated Revolution* was commissioned and produced by the dOCUMENTA(13) exhibit in Kassel, Germany, where Mroué also showed the lecture-performance version of the piece on June 7, 2012. In the twenty-two-minute-long video installation, Mroué's monologue and the video footage from the lecture-performance are serially edited after one another. Furthermore, Mroué has published the text of his lecture-performance in *The Drama Review* (2012). In our analysis, we will refer to the lecture-performance and quote from the published version of the text.

[4] The full Dogme 95 "Vow of Chastity" can be consulted on the collective's website, together with a list of Dogma-films: http://www.dogme95.dk/the-vow-of-chastity.

- filming must be done on location
- no use of props and sets
- the sound should not be produced apart from the images
- the use of hand-held cameras
- no use of optical effects

Other suggestions on how to film the revolution have clearly been adapted to better fit the context of activism and war, like the recommendation to shoot videos from the back, in order not to show identifiable faces, or the suggestion to carry banners in demonstrations in the opposite direction, in order for them to be legible on film. Mroué's list is clearly longer than the Dogme 95, ending with some general tips that stress the practical and even pragmatic side of filming the revolution, like:

- do not lose your phone (important for security reasons)
- always carry additional memory cards and batteries
- film the surroundings of a demonstration (in order to prove the veracity of the images)

Drawing such an explicit parallel between the recommendations of Syrian activists and the Dogme 95 cinematographic manifesto is far-reaching. Indeed, both the Dogma filmmakers and the Syrian activists aim to increase the authenticity and directness of the filmic image. Whereas Dogme 95 does this in the realm of cinema (emphasising the here-and-now and refusing special effects and post-production modifications), Syrian activists hope to increase the credibility of their recordings, giving them the status of evidence in their search for recognition and support.

In the first instance, both seem to have a different nature, the Dogme 95 primarily focusing on the artistic renewal of the aesthetic film image and the Syrian protesters underscoring the documentary potential of film images. However, Mroué's straightforward analogy demonstrates the aesthetic and activist stance of both. It is well known that von Trier's and Vinterberg's proposal was far from merely aesthetic, actively arguing against the studio system of film production and pleading for a more direct, "poorer," and purer way of making cinema (Hjort and Mackenzie 2003; Hjort 2005; Roman 2001). Conversely, the Syrian cinema of resistance is not only an activist popular appropriation of the means of image production and image distribution, opposing the Syrian regime and challenging traditional journalism.[5] As Carol Martin argues, it is also "evidence of a new kind of aesthetic, perhaps even an aesthetic weapon" (quoted in Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin 2012, 20).

Indeed, Mroué proposes to look at the camera as a *weapon*, the first shooting pixelated images, the latter shooting lethal bullets. When we think of the *role* images play in violent conflicts (but also broader, in visual culture), is it possible to make this analogy between the image and the bullet, between the camera and a weapon, productive? Are images as potent as bullets? As violent? As deadly?

In the subsequent three parts of the performance, Mroué investigates this proposition further, most explicitly in the gripping scene entitled "Double Shooting." Mroué shows a one minute twenty-four seconds piece of video footage on the projection screen of the theatre and simultaneously describes it. We see a blurry, shaky video shot from the inside of an apartment. We hear gunfire in the street, then the agitated voice of the camera man. Subsequently, we see the camera scanning through the surroundings, in search of the source of the gunfire. Momentarily, we see a sniper hiding in the street below. Then, he vanishes again. The camera

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[5] On this note, Mroué mentions the remarkable tendency of official news institutions using more and more amateur, unchecked and unauthored footage: "What is becoming evident today, however, is that these images are invading those of official institutions. Moreover, their demand is increasing, as well as the willingness to broadcast them in their original state, regardless of quality, without any corrections or alterations. These images are even used as the main constituent element of several official programs" (Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin 2012, 26).

looks for the sniper again, and when he appears inside the frame, we see him aiming the rifle at the camera and hear a shot. The camera falls to the floor, and now films the greyish ceiling of the apartment.[6]



Figure 1: Screenshot from *The Pixelated Revolution*
*Source: Mroué 2012*

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[6]    The original clip that was uploaded on YouTube is no longer available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cp_ajN7Kqvc. It has, however, been republished on other websites, amongst others on military.com, a news platform specifically focusing on military news stories. It must, however, be mentioned that the video seems to have been published on the website for spectacular purposes, rather than for journalistic ones. The footage can be seen here: http://www.military.com/video/specialties-and-personnel/snipers/syrian-sniper-kills-cameraman /1039252026001.

Mroué analyses the video almost frame by frame, speculating if the cameraman was hit and killed or only wounded.[7] In the subsequent scene, entitled "The Eye," Mroué explores the question of why the cameraman kept on filming, instead of bringing himself to safety. After hypothesising that the camera has become the optical prosthesis of the protesters, documenting what they see how they see it (Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin 2012, 29–30), Mroué suggests that the camera also introduces a detachment from reality:

> Because, by watching what is going on through a mediator—the little screen of a mobile phone—the eye sees the event as isolated from the real, as if it belongs to the realm of fiction. So, the Syrian cameraman will be watching the sniper directing his rifle towards him as if it is happening inside a film and he is only a spectator. This is why he won't feel the danger of the gun and won't run away. Because, as we know, in films the bullet will lose its way and go out of the film. I mean it will not make a hole in the screen and hit any of the spectators. It will always remain there, in the virtual world, the fictional one. (Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin 2012, 31)

Paradoxically, the camera as prosthesis seems to have become an integral part of the body while at the same time endangering that very body. In the next part, Mroué continues this logic when talking about the camera and the cameraman in terms of a di-pod, "a camera with two legs" (Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin 2012, 32). He opposes the handheld cameras of the protesters with the regime's use of tripods, instruments used to stabilise and support both cameras and weapons. With firearms mounted on them, tripods guarantee stability for efficient aim toward their target. With cameras mounted on them, they produce stable images, suggesting that "the solidity of the state is unquestionable and its image uncontaminated and unshakable" (Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin 2012, 32). Indeed, the Syrian civil war is fought on both sides not only *actually*, with real weapons causing actual casualties, but also *virtually* with two- and three-legged cameras and the images (and image damage) they produce. From a tactical point of view, then, ironically, it is as "valuable" to shoot a cameraman, as it is to shoot an armed resistance fighter. In this sense, the Syrian civil war is also a war of, with, and against images.

This point is further illuminated in the next scene, entitled "Tank." Mroué again presents footage from the resistance, which is as shocking and lethal as "Double Shooting," although it only lasts fourteen seconds. We see a suburban street with a jeep parked centrally in the image. Then, we see a tank slowly driving from right to left and abruptly stopping in the middle of an intersection. The barrel of the main gun starts rotating until it faces the camera straightforwardly. The tank fires one shot, hitting both the camera and the cameraman, in all probability fatally wounding him. Then, the image turns black.[8]

Again, Mroué focuses on harsh images that capture the lethal moment of eye contact between the cameraman and his killer. Both "Double Shooting" and "Tank" document the lethal gaze of the cameraman, who is deadly struck in a Medusa-like way. Famously, Medusa was a mythological monster with poisonous snakes instead of hair. She was capable of freezing her opponents and turning them into stone when they dared look into her face directly. In Mroué's

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[7] Mroué mentions that the cameraman says "I am wounded, I am wounded" at the end of the video, suggesting he may have survived the sniper attack. It is not possible to confirm if this was the case, or if Mroué used his artistic freedom here to deviate from the truth. It must be said, however, that the republication of the video on military.com was accompanied by an—again—unchecked rough translation of the voices at the end of the video that contradicts Mroué's suggestion. The translation mentions two voices talking in shock about the fact that the cameraman was hit in the head and killed by sniper fire. See http://www.military.com/video/specialties-and-personnel/snipers/syrian-sniper-kills-cameraman/1039252026001.

[8] Again, the original footage that was uploaded on YouTube is no longer available online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8-_wQYA-IA. Just like "Double Shooting," the footage was republished on the alternative military news outlet military.com. Again, the video seems to be published because of its spectacular content, rather than its news value. The video can be seen here: http://www.military.com/video/combat-vehicles/combat-tanks/bmp-attacks-camera-man-in-syria/1063861574001.

footage, it is not the viewer being blinded and killed for the act of looking. Rather, it is the cameraman who is lethally struck for the act of creating the image.

"Tank" and "Double Shooting" visualise the attempt to kill the cameraman and the image at once. Consequently, these images are inextricably bound up with their makers, who, paradoxically, remain absent in the pictures themselves. This absence is almost symbolic for their passing away which happens outside the frame of the camera. As such, these images are self-referential, as they not only visualise what can be seen inside the picture, but also point to the death of their maker *outside* the frame. In this sense, they are metapictures that refer to their own making (Mitchell 1994, 42). Mitchell discusses these self-referential images on the basis of a drawing by Saul Steinberg that originates from a spiralling form that refers to the artist and the construction of his drawing.[9] As such, the drawing represents itself, "creating a referential circle or mise en abîme" (56). Whereas *The Spiral* is self-referential because it explicitly integrates its maker within the frame, referring to the act of creation, the footage from "Double Shooting" and "Tank" is self-referential *ex negativo*, because it implicitly brings up the problematic absence of their makers. Indeed, these images carry in them the death of their makers, although, as Mroué rightly mentions, that "death is happening outside the image" (Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin 2012, 31).

Here, an interesting parallel arises with the theorisation of the photographic image as it can be found in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. In his essay, Barthes focuses on photography as a medium that captures death as it freezes life into still images. Barthes discusses the photograph of Lewis Payne, who was sentenced to death in 1865 and photographed prior to his execution by Alexander Gardner. He writes about the photograph: "*he is going to die.* I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future" (Barthes 1982, 96, original italics). For Barthes, a photograph is at the same time a guarantee for the subject portrayed *having been there*, as it is an uncanny reference to its inevitable death in the future (76–77).[10] Interestingly, Barthes mainly centres this ontology of photography on the act of looking at photographs and the objects portrayed in them. He focuses on the ambivalent *memento mori* quality (fossilisation) of photographs, remembering the life of people *inside of the picture*, who will die in the future. He is not at all concerned with the photographer taking the picture, who he merely refers to as "the operator" (cf. Wells 2000, 29). "Double Shooting" and "Tank" show in the most explicit way that this *memento mori* quality of the image not only holds true for who and what is visible inside its frame, but also extends to its maker, *outside of the image*. The images show the future, but not impending death, of the shooters visible within the picture *and* show the imminent demise of their makers that remain absent from the image. Their absence is haunting, because the images refer to their *having been there* just short moments earlier. As such, these cameramen are far from merely the "agents of death," as Barthes (1994, 92) describes them, but are unwitting spies, armed with cameras, documenting their own termination. In this sense, Barthes' ontology of *photography as fossilisation* extends to the ghostly, fossilised presence of both the subject of the image and its maker.

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[9] For copyright reasons, it is not possible to include Steinberg's drawing here. It can be consulted online at: http://www.adambaumgoldgallery.com/steinberg/2016/spiral1_WB.jpg.
[10] In this regard, Barthes writes about the "photographic referent" that it is "not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (1982, 76, original italics). This is for Barthes the essence of photography: "[…] in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality, and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of photography" (1982, 76–77, original italics).
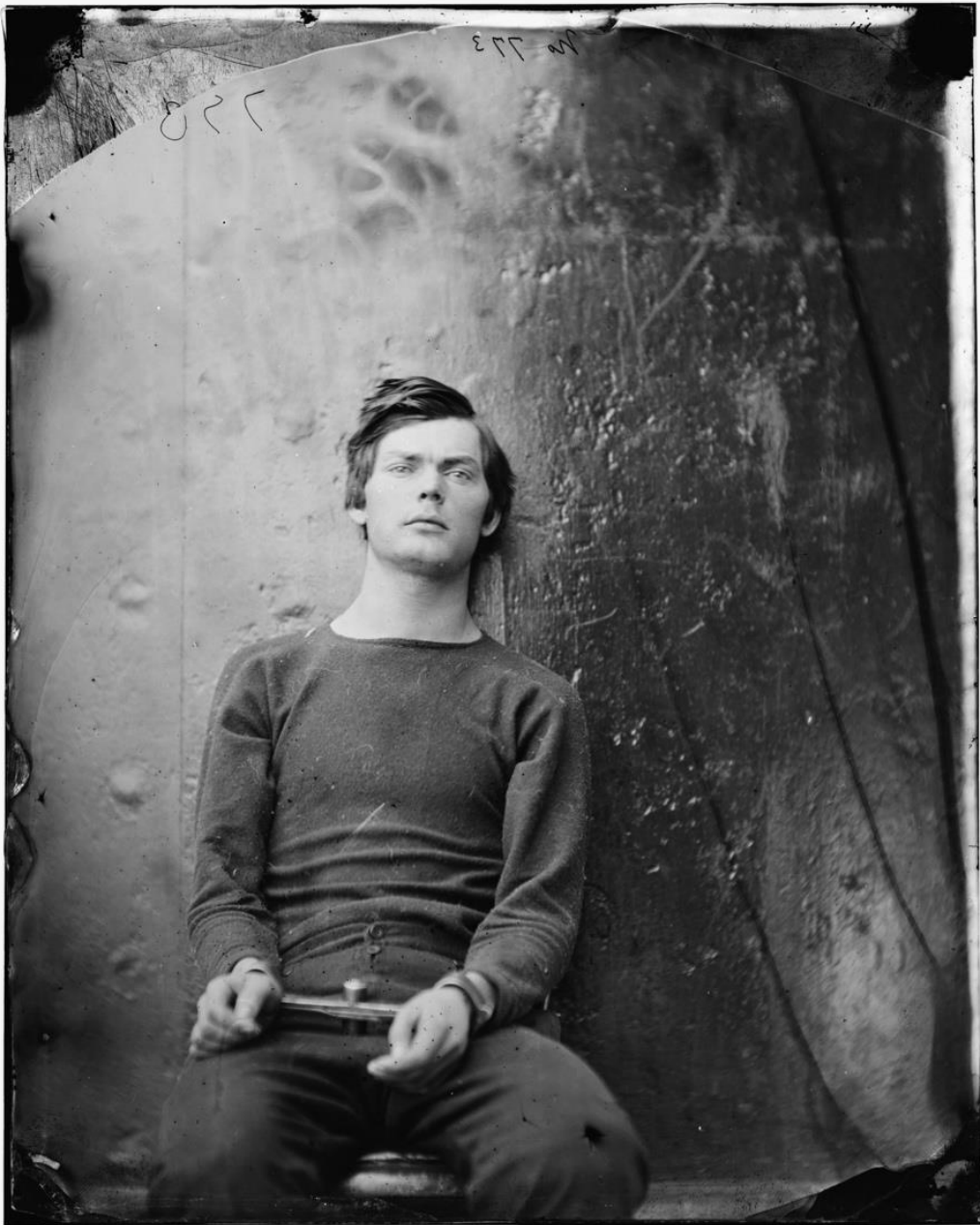
Figure 2: Lewis Payne, by Alexander Gardner
*Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.*

As much as these images are lasting remnants of the death of their makers, they also tell us a lot about the life of images. When we shift the focus away from the producer of the image, and toward the image itself, what seems to be at stake here is the apparent but interesting fact that images survive their makers. Both videos are blatant and obvious visualisations of how images last, while their maker dies at some point in the near future (in this case even in the present, while the image is being recorded). Indeed, images seem to lead lives of their own. At the moment of their creation, their life is still extremely precarious. In its first stages of life, the image

completely depends on the well-being of its maker, much like a helpless newborn relies on its parents and caretakers for survival. Mroué hints at this precariousness when he questions how many images have been lost, have been killed, together with their makers, without ever having been seen or uploaded. After being shared (digitally or analogously), images start leading lives of their own, apart from their makers. They crawl on hands and knees and learn to walk. Every time the image is displayed, viewed, or used, its life continues and changes, as does its power and influence. The image can create outrage when seen by the international community as proof of state violence in Syria. It can also generate fear: the protesters' fear for their own lives, or the sniper's fear of being identified, or the regime's fear of the power of these images. As such, also Mroué's usage of the footage in *The Pixelated Revolution* keeps the images (and their makers) alive, and even adds new layers to their life story, carrying the footage into a critical discourse about images and representation as such.

Indeed, *The Pixelated Revolution*, like most of Mroué's work, "measures and assesses the means of representation as such. His work reflects on its own means of representation and puts it into question, in terms of its capacity to account for the complex, layered realities of Lebanon" (Peleg and Bruzzi 2012, 47–48). The performance reflects on the power of the images of the revolution, on how they perform resistance in their own way while at the same time critically visualising the life of images. Life is, as Mroué argues, unclear and pixelated. There are no stable, high-quality, tripod-made images of the Syrian resistance, because the event itself is not stable. In this sense, Mroué connects the instability of the image with the unstable living conditions in the war-torn Syria of today.

*The Pixelated Revolution* for the most part focuses on the power of images, on what roles they can play. They *can* be powerful weapons in the fight against an oppressive regime, documenting atrocities and revealing the deadly potential of (shooting) images. And they *can* testify to the cultural, religious, and civil transformations that are occurring inside Syrian cities today. They are, in other words, powerful cultural weapons. However, images alone do not bring peace. In the closing scene of the performance, entitled "Images until Victory?", Mroué considers what images *cannot* do. Images alone will not suffice to bring the civil war to an end, as he admits in the closing sentence of the performance: "Anyway, I think that the Syrians are quite aware, unlike some of us, that images alone are not enough to achieve victory" (Mroué, Nawfal, and Martin 2012, 35). The lives of these images do matter, both in Syria and abroad, but they are not sufficient for reaching the utopian state of peace. *The Pixelated Revolution* shows how, sadly, the birth of these images is oftentimes connected to death *outside of the image*. In the next part of the article, we will look further into the ghostly lives images live, how they die, and even are reanimated from time to time.

## Images of the Living Dead: *Three Posters* (2000)

On Wednesday, August 7, 1985, a video was shown on the 8 p.m. newscast on the Lebanese public television channel Tele-Liban of Jamal Sati, claiming responsibility for a suicide attack he carried out earlier that day against the Israeli army, which occupied parts of southern Lebanon at that time. Footage like this in the evening news was not exceptional back then; the National Resistance Front in Lebanon, the armed wing of the Lebanese Communist Party, carried out missions and suicide attacks against the Israeli forces regularly, and the footage of martyrs claiming their actions was routinely broadcasted on the state-owned television network. "The broadcast depended neither on the success or failure of the mission nor on the significance of the target; all that was necessary was that the mission operative be dead" (Khoury and Mroué 2006, 183). Although Sati's suicide attack was radical, it disappeared into the collective memory of countless other resistance fighters who offered their lives for their homeland.

Fourteen years later, in 1999, Rabih Mroué and Elias Khoury managed to get hold of the unedited videotape of Sati's testimony, and find that he recorded not one, but three takes. Although the two testimonies differ only slightly from the final cut, both in tone and content,

they illustrate the hesitation of Sati, as he makes errors and stutters. More generally, they show that "the martyr is not a hero but a human being" (Khoury and Mroué 2006, 183). This discovery became the starting point for *Three Posters*, a performance by Rabih Mroué and Elias Khoury which premiered in September 2000 at the Ayloul Festival in Beirut.[11] The performance is a profound reflection on the representational value of martyr videos, on their confounded temporality (in the videos, the fighters are alive and well while announcing their death in the near future), and on how the Lebanese Resistance turned from a secular movement into the sphere of radicalism and religious fundamentalism.

The performance starts with a dark stage. The audience only sees a monitor, on which Mroué appears, wearing a military outfit. Behind him, we see part of a radiator and a wall with old-fashioned wallpaper. On the wall, we see portraits of martyrs, together with the flag of the Lebanese Communist Party. Mroué looks straight into the camera and starts a monologue typical for martyr videos: he mentions his fictitious name, when and where he was born, his family history, and how he found his way to the Resistance. Then, the monitor goes black. When the monitor comes back on, the audience sees a second tape, containing more or less the same information. Mroué sometimes hesitates, and when he mentions he wants to die a martyr in the south, rather than in "*marginal* wars in Tripoli, Beirut or the mountains" (Mroué and Khoury 2006, 186, emphasis added by the author), the image goes dark again. The fighter tries to correct his latent critique on the apparent futility of some of the Resistance's initiatives, shouting "Don't get me wrong," but the image stays dark. Such critiques have no place in martyr videos; the cameraman seems to implicitly decide, so a new take must be recorded. In the third and final take, Mroué seems more determined, explaining why he chose to execute the suicide mission: "My decision to commit a suicide operation doesn't mean that I chose death; no, I chose life. We die defending life, to give people hope of victory and freedom" (Mroué and Khoury 2006, 187). After greeting different political parties and resistance fighters in a loud voice, Mroué stands up and removes his military outfit. Now, he is wearing a regular deep blue t-shirt and pants. On the stage, a double door opens, granting the audience a view into the room in which Mroué is now standing. In this instance, the martyr turns out to be an actor, who is alive and well, playing out a martyr video in real time in the adjacent room. The martyr seems to come to life again in front of the eyes of the audience. Then, Mroué introduces himself much in the same way a martyr would, stating his actual name, his year of birth, his political affiliation, and the Lebanese Resistance activities in which he was involved. Subsequently, he introduces the next video recording that will be shown during the performance; the full, unedited tape of Jamal Sati's martyr video, as if the performance and the footage are an act of resistance of their own, claimed by Rabih Mroué, the actor/artist/martyr. Is *Three Posters* a kind of artistic resistance? And, if so, an act of resistance against what exactly?

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[11] *Three Posters* is a performance by Rabih Mroué and writer and poet Elias Khoury, first shown in Beirut in September 2000. In 2008, Mroué made a video installation entitled *On Three Posters*, in which he retells the performance and reflects on how its reception has changed after the attacks of 9/11 (which prompted Mroué never to play the performance again). The performance text was published in *The Drama Review* (*TDR*), together with an introduction by Rabih Mroué (2006). Both the introduction and the performance text were also republished in Carol Martin's *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (2010). In our analysis, we will refer to the performance (*Three Posters*), the video installation (*On Three Posters*), and the published performance text in *TDR*.

Figure 3: Still from *Three Posters*
*Source: Mroué 2000*

The first part of the performance unfolds one of three layers of the suicide bomber. Next to being a martyr (sacrificing his life for the greater good), and next to being a politician (the suicide bomber makes a violent, paramilitary statement, but also a political one), the suicide bomber is also an actor, as the first part explicitly portrays him rehearsing different takes of his testimony. As an actor, he almost narcissistically looks for the ideal final image of himself; the best version of his testimony, in which his decisiveness and eloquence are the strongest and his hesitation is the smallest. After all, the martyr video is the ultimate image of the suicide bomber; the final trace of the martyr ever *having been there*. Thinking of the suicide bomber as an actor, Mroué and Khoury reveal an interesting and oftentimes neglected aspect of martyrdom, namely the fact that it is a rehearsed performance in which a human *acts as* a hero (as the alleged heroic act has not been acted out yet). In one stroke, they also criticise these images of martyrdom, exposing these videos as fabricated, edited footage used as an ideological weapon.

This is achieved most expressively in the combination of the conflicting temporalities of the martyr video on the one hand and of theatre on the other. Let us first focus on the temporality of the martyr video. Recorded before the suicide mission, the footage anticipates a deadly act of sacrifice *in the near future*.[12] As such, the testimony of the martyr functions as a promise. In the present here and now, where the martyr is still alive, it announces a future deed that will cause the death of the martyr. In this sense, the martyr video is founded in a messianistic temporality,

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[12] In his introduction, Mroué mentions that the recordings are usually made the day before martyrs execute their mission (Khoury and Mroué 2006, 183). In this sense, they can be looked at as the actual initiation of the self-destructive act of the martyr.

in a projective logics of time that focuses on the future goal rather than on the present utterance.[13] After the suicide mission, however, the temporality of the martyr video radically changes, when it is broadcasted on television (or uploaded to the internet) and viewed by an audience of thousands, potentially millions. Then, the video becomes a report about a suicide attack that *has happened* and about a martyr *who has lived*. Here, Barthes' ontology of fossilisation, which was discussed earlier, is illustrated most acutely, as the promise of death-to-come that defines the photographic image is used here as a deadly threat. As such, the testimony becomes a record of history, a final trace of the martyr, and a token for commemoration of a person who has been. Now, the video footage has a retrospective temporality, looking from the messianistic fulfilled future into the closed-off past, which can in turn be archived, commemorated, or—of course— forgotten. By staging the martyr video as a *live* recording within the setting of a theatre performance, these two arrangements of time (projective and retrospective) collide with the ephemeral temporality of the theatre, taking place in the here and now, in front of a limited and co-present audience. This becomes clear in the revelatory act of the doors onstage opening and granting the audience a look into the room in which the martyr video is acted out in the present time of the theatre performance. The martyr is not a videotaped dead hero; he is a co-present, living actor.

Staging the martyr video in this specific, performative way, Mroué again creates a metapicture. As the different temporalities of the martyr video and of theatre collide, the image becomes self-referential and questions its own status *as an image*. This is achieved mainly by generic self-reference (and not the formal self-reference we discussed earlier with Saul Steinberg's *The Spiral*).[14] Next to formal self-reference, Mitchell (1994, 56) discerns a second class of metapictures, which "represent […] pictures as a class, the picture about pictures." He discusses *Egyptian Life Class*, a cartoon by Alain depicting Ancient-Egyptian art students measuring their model with pencils and fingers.[15] Here, two different traditions of visual representation collide with one another; on the one hand, the measurement of perspective painting that became paradigmatic in European art from the Renaissance era onwards and, on the other, the Ancient-Egyptian tradition of "symbolic perspective." As such, the picture not only shows its own construction, but also reveals the underlying conventions of a certain tradition of visual representation.

Staging the martyr video live in the theatre, Mroué questions the truth status of martyr testimony videos, criticises the ideological circumstances in which they are produced, and assesses their role in recent Lebanese history. As such, *Three Posters* investigates the place these uncanny videos take up in contemporary visual culture in the Middle East. As documents of past actions, they seem to have a twofold function. They are a keepsake for the lost life of the suicide bomber while at the same time glorifying the collective identity in the name of the homeland: "A visual culture of suicide bombing has emerged through the use of martyr videos and martyr posters as means of remembering the dead and promulgating a collective identity to those who

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[13] The concept of "projective temporality" is developed by Bojana Kunst in *Artist at Work. Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (2015), albeit in a completely different context. She argues that contemporary artists work in a projective temporality, forced to project their artistic ambitions in grant applications, producer contracts etc., that fixate in the present the artistic project and its effects *which will have happened* in the future. Considering the subjective, economic, and artistic consequences of this logics, Kunst (2015, 153–75) argues that projective temporality empties and hollows out the present moment in a messianistic way. In our argument, we abstract from the artistic and economic aspects of her argument, using the concept of projective temporality only for its consequences in the use and arrangement of time.

[14] It must be mentioned, however, that there is also a formal self-reference at work in the image. Within the video footage, we see the still-living martyr against the backdrop of deceased martyrs, in whose footsteps the martyr will follow. The image of the martyr, in other words, always integrates other images of martyrdom. This formal self-reference seems to be a formalistic leitmotiv in the *genre* of martyr videos, maybe because this chain of past and future sacrifices plays a role in the legitimisation of the suicide attack to come. Also the theatre performance becomes formally self-referential at this point, as Mroué as the subject and maker of the image literally steps through the door and outside the film frame, into the theatre auditorium.

[15] For copyright reasons, it is not possible to include the cartoon here. It can be consulted online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Brustlein#/media/File:Alain,_Drawing_From_the_Life,_1955.jpg.

seek to be suicide bombers" (Mashrabiyya 2011). Interestingly, these videos commemorate the dead by removing as much individuality as possible: ordinarily, the martyr brings his message in Standard Arabic, and not in his own local dialect. Furthermore, the videos resemble one another on a formal level: on the foreground, we see the face of the martyr, and on the background we see a collection of other martyrs who have come before him (or, in more recent videos, the background shows video clips of terror attacks and targets that have been added in post-production through the use of chroma key compositing, also known as "green screen technology"). As general moulds, then, these videos resemble empty containers, waiting to be filled by the body and voice of the next martyr. As such, they focus more on the collective function of the martyr, than on his individual identity:[16] "Arab countries, political powers and parties, religious organizations, and various official institutions continue to celebrate and praise martyrdom and collective death. [...] Yet these same societies fast forget their individual heroes, relegating them to a lengthening list of names of martyrs" (Khoury and Mroué 2006, 183). If it is possible to speak of a *genre* of martyr videos, one of its central features is formal uniformity, both on a visual and discursive level. This makes the martyr video recognisable, both as a token for commemoration and as an ideological weapon. Khoury and Mroué demystify this mythology and praise surrounding martyrdom by showing the martyr not as an infallible hero but as a hesitating human.

This critique continues in the next part of *Three Posters*, when Mroué and Khoury are sitting in the theatre auditorium and ostensibly insert a video cassette into a video player and press play. Together with their audience, they watch the full, unedited tape of Jamal Sati's martyr video. No longer looking at the suicide bomber as an actor, but as a martyr, this tape "portrays Jamal Sati's desire both to defer death and to withdraw from life in a depressing land, where the desire to live is considered a shameful betrayal of the State, the Nation, and the Homeland" (Khoury and Mroué 2006, 184). Paradoxically, Sati's martyr tape immortalises him, while at the same time announcing his impending death. In the real video testimony, the complicated relationship between projective and retrospective temporality that was discussed earlier, becomes surprisingly intense. After Mroué's short introduction, the audience knows that what will follow is not theatre (as in the first scene, when Mroué *played* a suicide bomber), but is *deadly* earnest. In the combination of true and fictional testimonies, however, Khoury and Mroué already supply the audience with ways of reading and interpreting the video testimony in another way than it was originally meant: "By framing Sati's video 'as is' within the new context of a theatrical performance Mroué and Khoury used the art institution as a framework to appropriate and eventually deconstruct the image that originally attempted to create and affirm a 'martyr'" (Straub 2017, 193). Sati's video testimony in *Three Posters* demonstrates the ghostly ambiguity of the martyr, who is dead *yet* somehow also alive. The martyr seems to hover between a multistable state of a dead body and a living symbol. This becomes clear when we look at Mitchell's (1994, 45) last class of metapictures, which he calls dialectical images. These images "illustrate the co-existence of contrary or simply different readings in the single image, a phenomenon called 'multistability'." As an example he refers to the infamous "Duck-Rabbit," an ambiguous image representing both animals in one, and that became well-known in the field of Gestalt psychology. Mitchell argues that multistable images have a "discursive or contextual self-reference; [their] reflexivity depends upon [their] insertion into a reflection on the nature of visual representation" (56).

Analogously, Mroué presents the martyr as a dialectical figure, whose imagery (and mythology) vacillates between life and death, between the symbolical and the material, and between collectivity and individuality. This instability of the image is staged in a self-critical way, as *Three Posters* does not go along in the celebration of martyrdom but rather questions the culture surrounding martyrdom in Lebanon and the greater Middle East. More specifically, it investigates the uncanny relation between life and death that characterises them. Indeed, in the

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[16] For an interesting discussion on the collective and individual dynamics at work in martyrdom, I refer to Ilic (2012).

videos, the martyrs seem to come to life again, reanimating the dead in a constant reminder of their sacrifice. "When the body of the bomber is gone, all that is left is the video and the martyr posters on the streets of the cities. The posters are easily faded, damaged by weather, posted over with other posters, or destroyed when the building is destroyed by a bombing or to make way for new construction. The video, it appears, is all that is permanent" (Mashrabiyya 2011).
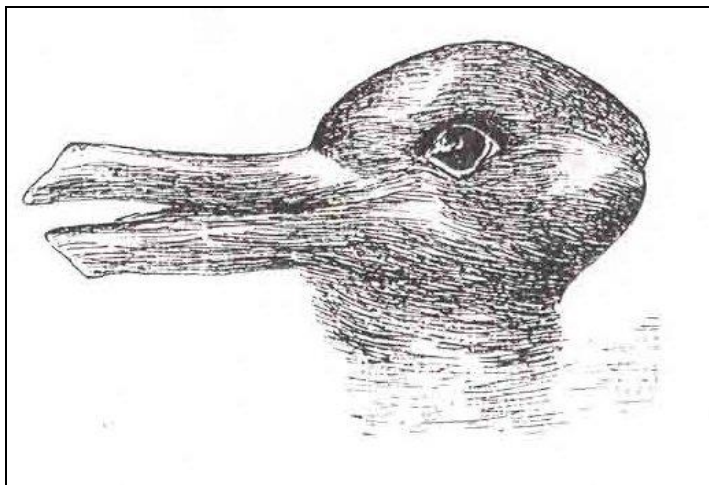


Figure 4: The Duck-Rabbit
*Source: Mitchell (1994, 46)*

The durability of the martyr video should, of course, not be exaggerated, as also videotapes are transitory, decaying and becoming unplayable over time. But more importantly, Sati's video shows that even martyr videos can die a different, and even more terrible death: the quiet death of going forgotten in dusty archives. Let us recollect that Sati's video was aired in 1985 and then disappeared in the archives of the Lebanese Communist Party, where it was rediscovered in 1999, prompting Mroué and Khoury to use it for *Three Posters*, ending fourteen years of hibernation between life and death.

Still, martyr videos testify to a kind of life of images, comparable to the life we already discovered when discussing *The Pixelated Revolution*. In this case, they become posthumous images that serve their function in the individual and collective culture of commemoration. They are images that literally survive the martyr (they live on, at least potentially, while the martyr dies a certain death). They can live on in collective memory, but they can also die a silent death, becoming one in a million of the lengthening list of martyrs. Their death is, however, not eternal, or at least not necessarily. As Mroué and Khoury show, these images can be reanimated, brought to life again, be it in a broadcast on television, an upload to the internet, or as footage in a theatre performance. It is, however, ironical, that the new life of Sati's video in *Three Posters* is exactly the opposite of its former life as a martyr video *pur sang*: in the performance, Sati's testimony is used to criticise the mythology of (secular) martyrdom rather than to celebrate Lebanese acts of resistance. As such, the lives of images resemble the life of a ventriloquist's dummy, as Mitchell (2005, 140) notes: "A picture is less like a statement or speech act, then, than like a speaker capable of an infinite number of utterances. An image is not a text to be read but a ventriloquist's dummy into which we project our own voice." The metaphor of the martyr and his video as ventriloquist's dummies is illustrated pre-eminently in the last part of *Three Posters*. Here, the audience again sees video footage, this time an interview with Elias Attallah, a prominent figure in the Lebanese Communist Party and the National Resistance Front, and the person responsible for the suicide mission of Jamal Sati in 1985. The interview was conducted by Rabih Mroué and Elias Khoury during the creation period of the performance in 2000. The openhearted interview

shines light on "the political circumstances and practices that surrounded [Sati's] mission and [… prompts] a reevaluation of the strategies and political activities of the Left during the Lebanese civil war" (Khoury and Mroué 2006, 184). Indeed, Sati's action was a part of a broader practice of *secular* martyrdom that was organised by the National Resistance Front and connected to the Lebanese Communist party. His suicide mission was not fuelled by religious fundamentalism, but by left-wing patriotism. In the course of the civil war, however, the left-wing political party lost its relevancy, in part because the national resistance was recuperated more and more by fundamentalist Islamic forces, like the Lebanese political party and paramilitary group Hezbollah. In this sense, the performance reflects not only the mythology surrounding martyrdom, but also the wider failure of the leftist political project in Lebanon.[17] As such, the interview reveals Sati's actions to be only a small link in a wider chain of national and international political powers and players that were not necessarily or not uniquely driven by the patriot ideals Sati sacrificed his life for.

Interestingly, theatre performances can also take on the life of a ventriloquist's dummy, into which audiences can project their own interpretations. This is exactly what happened to *Three Posters* after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Mroué made the performance in a pre-9/11 context as a reflection on secular martyrdom in Lebanon. After 2001, however, the performance was viewed in light of the contemporary debate on fundamentalist Islamic terrorism, tearing the performance loose from the specific Lebanese context it was created in. Mroué decided not to perform *Three Posters* again, and, instead, made a video installation in 2008 entitled *On Three Posters*. In the video work, Mroué shows footage of the performance, contextualises it, and talks about the changed reception of the piece after 2001. As such, the video work looks at the images Western audiences have of martyrs: "While *Three Posters* exposes how the martyr persona is constructed in front of the video camera, *On Three Posters* exposes the construction of the martyr in the imagination of Western audiences after 9/11" (Straub 2017, 195). *Three Posters* and *On Three Posters* show the problematic and complex imagery surrounding martyrdom and martyr videos. Sati's testimony shows how the image becomes an ideological weapon, as the image of the martyr lives on while the martyr himself has died. In this sense, *Three Posters* is about the survival of images, but also about the death(s) they can die (in archives, for example) and how they can be reanimated. When brought back to life, images can come to signify the exact opposite of their original intended goal. Whereas Sati recorded his suicide testimony to perpetuate a culture and celebration of martyrdom, *Three Posters* reframes that footage to accomplish an alternative critique, rigorously questioning the mythology surrounding the martyr. In this sense, the martyr video is exposed as an ideological construct, formative of specific world views.[18] If images are alive, then their lives are radically unstable, and depend on why and how they are used and reused, how they are contextualised, recontextualised, and decontextualised, and how they are (re)animated. Mroué's later video work *On Three Posters* demonstrates that this holds true for theatre performances as well.

## Conclusion

Rabih Mroué's artistic work clearly shows consistency, both on a thematic and on a formal level. Thematically, Mroué time and again picks up the violent recent history of his homeland, Lebanon, and the broader conflicts in the Middle East. In particular, he engages with the imagery of martyrdom, the role images play, and the lives they live. Although his work is clearly

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[17] For a wider discussion on the failed leftist political project and the non-secular recuperation of the resistance, I refer to Elias (2017).
[18] This point is also made by Natasa Ilic: "Mroué's works facilitate intervention into social reality by constantly complicating the use of history and the archive for any legitimization of the present, preventing predetermined meanings based on superficial mediations and ideological distortions" (Ilic 2012, 204).

informed by historical events, Mroué is not interested in creating alternative histories, nor does he want to objectively assert alternative truths about the politics and conflicts of his homeland.

Nevertheless, his performances almost without exception take the form of lecture-performances, suggesting an educational aspect or at least a format that can potentially transmit knowledge. This knowledge is not primarily to be found on a factual level (what is fact/fiction) but on the level of image theory. More than anything, Mroué's performances reflect on the complicated roles images play and on the unexpected turns their lives take. In this sense, Mroué stages the instability of the image and shows how their meaning is constantly renegotiated, how they are constantly kept alive in different forms, caught between their past, present, and future lives.

*Three Posters* and *The Pixelated Revolution* both deal with the survival of images. *Three Posters* investigates how the survival of the image in the martyr video is used as an ideological weapon, but also shows how that same image can die and go forgotten in dusty archives. *The Pixelated Revolution* considers the positive side of using the image as a weapon in the resistance against oppressive regimes, emphasising the authenticity and directness of the images of resistance in close connection to the Dogme 95 filmic manifesto. Images are not as deadly as bullets, but they can be as powerful, even if (or maybe because) their maker dies while shooting them. Both pieces also unveil the surprising lives images can lead, as images are not these stable, material entities we would like them to be. Rather, they resemble Mitchell's metaphor of the ventriloquist's dummy, as images seem to be empty surfaces on which communities or stakeholders can project different meanings and values. In this sense, Mroué stages the image not as an object to be (re)mediated, but as an organism that is very much alive.

Finally, Mroué's performances are also a tribute to the potential of theatre. Time and again, Mroué reflects on his own political and ethical role as an artist who reanimates and remediates images. With his performances, he takes a stance against simplified ideological oppositions and puts on the table important but complicated issues that have both a local and an international urgency. In this sense, Mroué's performances engage their audiences to question their own ethical position and ideological presuppositions. Furthermore, Mroué's performances play a crucial role in the lives their respective images get to live. In this sense, Mroué positions the theatre as a critical medium in which images can survive, or even take on different lives, while at the same time scrutinising the media and stakeholders that are involved in keeping images alive, in killing them, or in reanimating them.

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*The International Journal of the Image* interrogates the nature of the image and functions of image-making. This cross-disciplinary journal brings together researchers, theoreticians, practitioners, and teachers from areas of interest including: architecture, art, cognitive science, communications, computer science, cultural studies, design, education, film studies, history, linguistics, management, marketing, media studies, museum studies, philosophy, photography, psychology, religious studies, semiotics, and more.

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