

Wanting to See

WARTIME WITNESSING AND POSTWAR HAUNTING IN LEBANESE CINEMA

Near the end of Ghassan Salhab's *The Last Man* (*al-Atlal*, 2005), the film's protagonist Dr. Khalil Shams stares intently into the camera in a shot that discloses definitively that he is, in fact, a vampire (figure 6.1). After holding this head-on framing for several seconds, a reverse shot from behind him reveals that he has been staring at mirror behind the bar at which he is sitting, a mirror that does not reflect him. Vampires, of course, create no reflections. Khalil, a successful physician living in Beirut, has found that he is trapped between the living and the dead; the vampire is *undead*. The young woman sitting beside him notices that he does not reflect in the mirror, and backs away from him slowly while cursing under her breath.

The Last Man is one of several films produced in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war that represent the cultural memory of the war through stories with haunting ghosts, vampires, and characters caught in a liminal space between life and death. These films follow earlier generations of postwar works in which the primary framing is that of returning to the war setting and witnessing the war, often anew. In these contexts, the ghostly tropes of these later films are productive, and not simply symptomatic. More than simply a natural outcome of the trauma processes of postconflict societies, these tropes contribute to postwar cultural memory and to contestation over the narratives that codify the war experience and its memories. Social trauma is often allegorized through stories of haunting, of hallucinatory spaces between life and death, and figures of the undead, for the memories and narratives that are productive of social trauma often exist in the shadows of prevailing cultural memory, emerging in unexpected moments with shocking or frightening effect. Indeed, ghost stories and life-after-death tales may both be catalysts for the examination of these painful subjects in a mythological or allegorical frame, or they may be narrative molds into which the irresolution



FIGURE 6.1 *Khalil Shams realizes he is a vampire (The Last Man)*

of social trauma may be poured, and from which a particular set of meanings and interpretations may be inferred. In this sense, tropes of the haunting specter offer themselves to the process of trauma production, and are often socially productive vehicles for articulating social trauma.

Avery Gordon (2008, 63) cites this productivity when she argues the presence of ghosts in narratives concerning unresolved political or social conflicts is telling: the ghost “makes itself known . . . through haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as a recognition.” The affective work of haunting produces a recognition of and active engagement with the social imperatives surrounding the ghost story. Gordon offers us a guide in addressing these themes: “to write about invisibilities and hauntings . . . requires attention to what appears dead, but is nonetheless powerfully real” (42). Engaging with “invisibilities and hauntings” leads us to an understanding of the undead within these contexts: undead in the sense of being between life and death, or of showing defining symptoms of both conditions. While we may tie these themes to the anxious pessimism that is often found in contexts such as that of postwar Lebanon, in the bleakness of this haunted landscape, there is nonetheless a small glimmer of light that emerges from the ghost story. As Gordon further notes, “from a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope” (64).

In this chapter, my discussion pursues two related threads: first, the move from cultural memory of wartime witnessing in Lebanese documentary works to that of exploring postconflict traumatic irresolution in imaginative fictive narratives; and second, the productivity, in a small number of Lebanese film works, of cinematic tropes of the undead as a critical reflection on unresolved calls for justice. These are both then addressed in relation to

the idealization of a justice that is impossible to obtain in unresolved post-conflict settings. In the case of Lebanon, I illustrate how documentary works carry out a necessary witnessing of the civil war, but lead eventually to haunting tales after the reconstruction regime's ascendancy in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Finally, as a result of the 2006 war with Israel, a new cultural formulation emerges, one that returns to questions about the necessity of witnessing, but with much greater pessimism for a linkage between witnessing and justice; a pessimism that demands a new vantage upon the act of seeing.

Undead here refers to beings or states of being that cross a line between living and dead, characteristics of the topoi of the vampire and ghost alike. Writing on the concept of the undead, Keith Jacobi (2003, 96) insists on their corporeal nature, but for the purposes of this discussion the question of materiality is not significant—what undead here indexes is the uneasy liminal status of living through death, or dying with life. Mark Westmoreland's (2010) study of postwar Lebanese visual cultures traces the presence of the undead in particular through contemporary arts practice to cinema, arguing that, "within Lebanon's catastrophic time and space, governed by selective amnesia, reproductive media has enabled the articulation of an imaginary world" (178). He argues that this world, "inhabited by phantoms and monstrous subjects," is conjured "in order to break the official silence and collective amnesia that keeps the Lebanese distracted from collectively engaging the trauma of the past" (178).

I do not depart from Westmoreland's conclusion that the interest in the undead in Lebanese cultural work of this period may be due to the fact that, "perhaps the undead thirst for resurrection because they have not been mourned . . . until the undead can be put to rest they will further compel violence" (Westmoreland 2010, 201). However, I also wish to go further in exploring how the references to a liminal world between life and death, and to specters and ghosts, may also be productive of a certain form of trauma discourse, one that inhabits unsettled domains as part of its explorations of injustice. Processes of trauma production may employ tropes of the undead to conjure the outlines of the demands for justice (which often underlie the emergence of social trauma) because the undead are emblematic of a profound threat to the social order. Where a predominant power configuration is seen to deny a just resolution to the experiences of trauma, demands for justice take a central role in the project of trauma production; the threat of undead rising is not simply a metaphor for an outbreak of war or violence, but of a deeper crisis of subjectivity that arises when the war is one that makes the enemy oneself. War crimes not addressed by postwar arrangements naturally leave unresolved the claims of victims whose response may often take the form of projects of trauma production. The unresolved claims themselves often have a haunting effect on society, rising in darkness or in dreams in reaction to the perceived threat of oblivion.¹

Lebanon's Postwar Legacies

Thus it is not surprising that with the cessation of the cycle of violence and hostilities that are termed the Lebanese civil war, a specter rose over Lebanese cultural life—a specter representing in some measure the war itself, but also the absence of a process of accountability, as well as an accounting of the history of the war. This spirit signified many failures in the echoes and reverberations of the “last” gunshots—no accounting for the thousands of disappeared, no trials for perpetrators of massacres, no commissions to determine the cause for the war to begin with. As I have discussed in chapter 5, Sune Haugbolle (2005) has argued that the postwar environment in Lebanon was to be characterized by an “official amnesia”—conveyed for example in public school history curricula that end in the 1940s, and more generally in a lack of support for (and in some cases, repression of) acts of commemoration or public accounting. Along similar lines, miriam cooke (2002, 8) argues that the reconstruction regime's ethos demanded a “mobilizing [of] amnesia.” Najib Hourani (2008, 287) rejects what he terms “the amnesia thesis” by arguing that this view “stands in marked contrast to a reality in which debates about the war implicitly or explicitly inform political struggles over the post-conflict social order”; however, he does so by recourse to the work of independent cultural producers and activists, and does not seem to dispute the issue that the war is repressed at the official level. Haugbolle (2005, 192) also notes that the years after the 1991 Taif agreements that are seen by most as marking the end of the war were characterized by confusion over how to even define the war, and “initially the war was hardly even conceived as a finite period of time.” Beyond leaving individuals who had lived through a period of catastrophe and violence without a public forum for addressing these experiences, the dominant postwar agenda aimed to redirect national cultural memory to an embrace of reconstruction projects, and with it a redefinition of Lebanese national identity, by denying local culpability for any aspect of the war. In this way, the involvement of outside actors was amplified to a degree where Lebanese played the role only of victims, rather than of participants. So as to not stoke tensions, even if only by indirectly alluding to the active collaboration of local groups with these outside actors, most often even the outside forces would not be named. Due to the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, and the ongoing low-intensity conflicts that have erupted in Lebanon with unsettling continuity since 2005, attempts to present the civil war as a temporally discrete historical “event” have lost ground to a more pervasive sense that war has been ongoing.

While they are distinct in many ways from the post-1948 experiences of Palestinians, it is instructive to consider the ways by which the cultural memory discourse in both Lebanon and Palestine are framed by a temporal irresolution. As discussed in chapter 4, in the Palestinian case this lack

of narrative closure to a historical wound is accompanied by the continuing post-1967 occupation and by state policies that have continued the experiences of loss and dispossession inaugurated by the Nakba. The Lebanese case is significantly different in that its irresolutions are caused less by the continuing policies of a powerful actor within the conflict than as a function of a highly internally fragmented and polarized political environment populated by multiple actors, none of whom has been able to assert unquestioned dominance over the others.

Thus, instead of either truth or reconciliation, the wounds of the war were cauterized by large-scale, top-down reconstruction projects, epitomized in the private-public company Solidere's massive redevelopment of Beirut's city center, and a plan to position Lebanon as an investment and financial-services hub within the circuits of neoliberal globalization, a project closely associated with the former prime minister Rafic Hariri. As miriam cooke (2002, 409) argues, "SOLIDERE promised a return, a reversion to a pre-war past. The 'return' was affected through a politics of innocence that flattened, homogenized, and aestheticized the traces of war. Agents of the destruction disappeared so that the thing itself became responsible for its own destruction. The promised return capitalizes on nostalgia for communal harmony and desire for profit without guilt or memory, in the hope that the repressed will not return." Some critics viewed this process in even more pessimistic terms. For example, Saree Makdisi (1997, 693) argues that, "What Solidere and Harirism seem to represent is precisely the withering away of the state, whatever one might have called a public sphere or civil society, and their final and decisive colonization by capital."

Along similar lines, the Lebanese theorist and videographer Jalal Toufic (2003, 72) says, "The demolition of many of the ruined buildings . . . was war by other means; the war on the traces of the war is part of the traces of the war, hence signals that the war is continuing." Much of the anxiety of those who criticized the reconstruction ideology of Solidere and Harirism was due to their sense that the collateral for such projects was paid for through a regime of silence, denial, and repression, where the subject of the war's memory was concerned. The practical political dimension also appeared difficult for many to accept: in particular that the amnesties that were agreed in an effort to end the fighting also allowed many of the most notorious figures of the war to emerge as stakeholders in the postwar reconstruction projects. Nonetheless, projects to compel a broader engagement with the question of how to remember the war began to be developed as early as the mid-1990s, largely within academic and civil society arenas. Organizations like Memory for the Future (Dhakira lil-Ghad) and UMAM Documentation and Research, among others, began in 1999 and 2004, respectively to explore memories of the war, "because 'the past doesn't want to pass,' and because it erects walls between us" as Amal Makarem, an organizing member of Memory for the

Future, intones in her introduction to published conference proceedings for the organization (Makarem 2001, 34). Artists and other cultural producers were perhaps the most active in giving voice to concerns that postwar Lebanon was not effectively confronting the legacy of the conflict. These first efforts emerged against an unsympathetic backdrop, where any discussion of the war was seen as potentially reopening the door to sectarian tensions.

During and after the war, cinema emerged as one of the primary cultural forums for engaging the experiences of the war. As Lina Khatib (2008, 169) suggests, after the war, many “seemed to choose to forget—the memory of the war was deemed too painful and guilt-inducing to be resurrected. . . . Filmmakers . . . resisted the sidelining of the memory of the war, and continued to make films about their war experiences.” But this imperative has not always been viewed positively—often Lebanese filmmakers have seen the legacy of the war more as an albatross hung around their necks, preventing them from exploring other subjects. Even with such a burden, Lebanese filmmakers have served as some of the most prescient voices on the subject of the war and on its lasting legacy in postwar Lebanon. The reality of a continuing ebb and flow of conflict and violence between various sectarian groups in Lebanon often serves to drive cultural producers away from work that would address certain core issues relating to the cultural memory of the war—something that filmmakers have been more capable in doing.

The first generation of war and postwar filmmakers, from documentarians such as Mai Masri and Jean Chamoun to feature filmmakers such as Jocelyn Saab, Samir Habchi, and Maroun Baghdadi, dealt primarily with the crisis in representation of the war as lived experience. Their films, set in (and sometimes even shot during) periods of fighting, articulate the impossibility of sufficiently representing the inchoate events of civil conflict: neighbors fighting neighbors, arbitrary violence, the sudden disappearance of noncombatant loved ones, the rise and fall of hopes for an end to the conflict. The project of witnessing the war through documentary came to serve as a foremost aim for many of the filmmakers active during the war years. However, imaginative and nondocumentary approaches also emerged, often giving a more complex view of the impact of the war upon Lebanese. Jocelyn Saab’s *A Suspended Life* (*Ghazl al-binat*, 1985), for example, juxtaposes the backdrop of the war-torn city to the fantasies of classic Egyptian cinema through the relationship of two adolescent girls coming to terms with the adult realities of life as young women in a war-torn patriarchal context, mixing a documentary approach to location (with most of the film shot in half-destroyed buildings) with narrative fiction. Maroun Baghdadi’s *Little Wars* (*Hurub saghira*, 1982) explores how the initial idealistic political commitments that drew many young Lebanese to involvement were corrupted and betrayed. It indicates that the only recourse for many who were slowly drawn into the war’s logic was escaping from the country, death, or insanity. Made ten years later, and just after the end of the

war, Samir Habchi's *The Tornado* (*al-A'sar*, 1992) draws exactly the same conclusions, as its protagonist—a non-combatant who has returned to Beirut after years away—is driven to militancy as well as madness, ending with his shooting at the sky (to kill God), bringing on a rain of blood. These and a small number of other narrative productions set the grounds for postwar films that would articulate a cultural memory of the conflict, what Khatib (2008, 179) terms “a memory project giving voice to a silenced past.”

Beyond the explorations of war witnessing in fictional narrative cinema works, the most impressive catalog to offer testimony to the war's experiences comes in the documentaries of Mai Masri (many of whose films were codirected by Jean Chamoun). Masri and Chamoun's early work *Under the Rubble* (1982) focuses on the consequences of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the siege of West Beirut in that year. The film is an activist work, quite clearly made to demand recognition by the international community of the devastation and war crimes carried out during the invasion. The subjects of the film are largely socially marginalized—southern Lebanese refugees who recount their long marches from the south to Beirut, or Palestinian refugees in camps near Beirut whose dwellings have been bombed. The film includes voice-over commentary, which while not exactly pedantic does intrude upon the voices of victims of the war who are interviewed throughout the work. However, the film's aim is to give a forum for the testimony of these people concerning the circumstances during the Israeli invasion. In this way it serves as a fairly paradigmatic example of cinematic witnessing-discourse.

However, in its remarkable ending sequence, the work opens an ambivalent interpretive space, hinting at the impossibility of bearing witness, through a collage of sometimes conflicting images. The sequence begins with images of the evacuation of PLO fighters from Beirut, set against the soundtrack, a revolutionary song by the Egyptian singer Shaykh Imam. The images focus largely on the actions of women who are being left behind—they are celebrating with *zagharid* ululations and *dabke* dancing, but weeping as well. This sequence and its focus on the ritual response of the Palestinian women to the departing fighters bears witness to the complexity of the traumas of this episode of the war. Rather than simply testifying to the horrors of the war—what much film has done up to this point—this sequence betrays the ambiguities of these experiences as well: the triumphal celebration in the face of military defeat, even as the women and children are to be deprived of their only protection. The sequence ends with a double-exposed image of tanks overlaying a mourning woman, images that bleed into footage of the victims of the Sabra and Shatila massacre, carried out only shortly after the departure of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) fighters. (I will say more about the remembrance of this massacre in chapter 7). While the film deploys witnessing-discourse to present an urgent call for recognition of the war's most desperate victims, it also ends ambivalently by relating scenes of defiant celebration in the face of defeat set against the shocking images of the massacre.

The problematic of establishing a common cultural memory of the civil war may be traced back to some of the earliest works made in the postwar period. In *Suspended Dreams* (*Ahlam mu'alliqa*, 1991), Masri and Chamoun focus on the situation in Beirut just after the declaration of the end of the civil war. This documentary follows the question of how a number of individuals drawn from a broad set of social contexts deal with their memories of the war, illustrating how divergent and even irreconcilable these different memories have been and the obstacles that prevent their individual memories from coalescing into a common cultural memory. The film follows a number of characters, including a woman whose husband was kidnapped during the war and is still missing, two former fighters from opposing militia who are now friends and coworkers, and a prominent theater actor. In its portrait of each of the individuals, the film examines what it means for them to be now at the “end” of the conflict, and what social forces are acting to evoke or prohibit a new public consensus around memories of the war. For each, the question of memory is paramount—and the ties that memory brings, or the walls it establishes between individuals and groups.

The issue of memory is central in the relationship of Nabil and Rambo, the two former militiamen from opposing sides who now are friends. In one scene the two men and their families gather for a dinner. However, the topic that dominates their conversation is a car bomb that has exploded earlier in the day. Nabil, who is Muslim, begins to speak about the bombing, which had occurred in a Muslim district, and Rambo's response—he is Christian—is “hawal tinsa,” “try to forget.” Nabil protests, “How can I forget?” and Rambo grows uncomfortable and defensive. The question of memory—how to remember, what to remember—draws a stark line between the two, who have gone so far to overcome their prior enmity. The most self-reflective views on the role of cultural memory are offered by Rafiq, the actor, who appears in the film sitting in a bombed-out theater, its seats overturned and strewn around. He meditates on the demands being made upon victims of the trauma of the war to forget and move on. He protests against these demands, saying “it's normal to defend your memories . . . you're defending life.” Later he links his wish to be able to express and retain his memory to a resolution of his trauma. In the face of a public-relations campaign to reconstruct the city of Beirut so as to erase or repress the memories of the war, Rafiq asks, “how will the destruction within me be repaired?” B-roll images of billboards of advertisements arrayed along a highway illustrate his predicament. He ends, saying that through a rising consumerism and through the destruction of the past through reconstruction projects, “they want to brainwash you.”

Masri and Chamoun's film is broadly representative of the interests of Lebanese filmmakers in the postwar context, even those working on fictional narratives. In this, the cosmopolitan and largely nonsectarian milieu of cultural producers in Lebanon has been motivated to raise questions and demand an accounting of the war as a result of the lack of a coherent national accounting,

an imperative imbued with urgency in the initial years after the Ta'if agreement, which signaled the end of the war. However, it is highly questionable how effective these efforts have been—one cannot help but ask what defines memory discourse among the groups that have a political stake in defining the memory of the war, for example, Hizbullah, the Lebanese Forces, or any of the other parties to the conflict who are now involved in state politics. Generally speaking, the efforts to develop a common cultural memory have shown little impact on public policy and the process of “national reconciliation” in Lebanon. In more recent years postwar trauma-production has mutated into a bitter reflection, somewhat nihilistic in its view of the possibility of achieving resolution to the problematic memory of the war.

Even until the mid-1990s, the predominant themes of Lebanese war-related cinema were mostly the scenario of the war itself, as the narratives set in those days slowly passed from vital individual memories to a more settled form of cultural memory. *West Beirut* (*Bayrut Gharbi*, 1996) represents a breaking point in this trajectory, as it successfully produced a broad and generally uncontroversial narrative of the war that invited identification across sectarian lines: the film breaks with the crisis of representation, and defiantly views the war as eminently representable. The film cleverly indexes this question of representation self-reflexively, in the cinematic aspirations of Tareq, the film's protagonist, who records his view of the war on his Super-8 camera. Even the tragic end of the film—ostensibly, his mother's death, which is signaled through the use of slow-motion Super-8 footage of her—allows for a resolution of this loss, endeavors to open the door to what Freud ([1917] 1957, 243) terms “the normal affect of mourning,” and allows the audience to find a closure to the myriad tragedies of the war (figure 6.2).



FIGURE 6.2 *Tareq remembers shooting film of his mother* (*West Beirut*)

The release of *West Beirut* coincided with the ascendancy of the Solidere projects of rebuilding, and the nostalgic accounting of the war in the film accorded with—or at least did not significantly challenge—the representation of the war advocated by the redevelopment regime. However, the project of *West Beirut*, that of constructing a common cultural memory of the war that was based on an aesthetic of what we may term “pure representation” was one that may be said to have largely failed. Despite the popularity of the film, the broader cultural memory of the war remained fractured and irresolute, with continued reluctance on the part of the state and the commercial-mercantile elites to produce a consensus on how to remember the war. This unease bled into art practice and works of cultural production as well. As Walid Sadek (2007, 38) notes of the artists of the period, “Their inability to achieve pure representation is not a failure but rather the mark of a reluctance traceable in Beirut art starting in the mid-1990s. Some artworks exacerbate this reluctance, I argue, by dragging back onto the throne of pure representation—and consequently into public space—the instability of physical matter.” One may consider the “reluctance” identified so perceptively by Sadek as a form of resistance to the ideology of reconstruction, a resistance that by effect sees pure representation as suspect and complicit.

By the early years of the new millennium, Lebanese filmmakers were engaging with war themes through a new set of concerns. More and more, films began to address the postwar context more than the experiences of the war themselves. Representation of wartime—the witnessing of violence—was replaced by representation of memory processes and by a melancholic reaction to the repression of public memorialization. This stage culminated with the assassination of former prime minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, and the outcome of the 2006 war with Israel. The period leading up to the assassination of Hariri was marked by a degree of apprehension and anxiety relating to the completion of much of the reconstruction regime and a resulting lack of ideological cohesion among Lebanon’s elites as to the future direction of the country. While still the memorialization of the war would be cast as problematic, the calls for an accounting had only increased from different corners. The assassination (including its aftermath—the withdrawal of Syrian forces and popular mobilizations by Hariri’s al-Mustaqbal grouping on one hand and by Hizbullah and its allies on the other) and the 2006 “Summer War” dramatically altered the cultural landscape of the country once again, opening new wounds that would result in renewed—yet not entirely separate—calls for justice that are formulated within projects of trauma production.

Postwar Hauntings

In Lebanon, despite the ambitious projects and costly investments, the specter of the war—its undead body—would rise to haunt the city in its metaphorical nights. Echoing Jalal Toufic's comment that the form of reconstruction in Lebanon ironically only "signals that the war is continuing," one may say that the continuing war, invisible on the surface but lurking in the city's corners at night, haunts the city. Westmoreland (2009, 43) has suggested that in Lebanon, "post-war mediation uncovers withdrawn subjectivities evocative of ghosts that have not been mourned and spectres that have not been tried for their crimes." The recurrent references to haunting and the undead are in fact more prevalent in literary than in cinematic representations, and a separate study—focusing on works such as Rashid al-Da'if's *Dear Mr. Kawabata* and *Passage to Dusk*, or Hoda Barakat's *The Tiller of Waters*, among others—would be needed to address these works. Nonetheless, these cinematic references are part of a broader phenomenon of explorations of the contact zone between living and dead, of which ghosts and vampires are only two popular tropes.

What, we may ask, is at stake in these evocations of the undead? Clearly, these references to the undead have little to do with the rich topoi of the vampire that lurk seductively at the margins of the enduring Gothic ethos of postindustrial Europe or in the second-millennial fantasies of pubescent North America. What the postcolonial context, here Lebanon, demands is an understanding of the grey margins between life and death—and the return to life from death (vampires and haunting) are the zones of traumatic resonance, where the productive impulses of trauma are to be found. What is at stake is what Avery Gordon (2008, 64) calls "*a concern for justice*" (emphasis in original), where that which haunts a society is a failure to achieve justice. As Bliss Cua Lim (2001, 288) argues, ghost films often serve as historical allegories—in particular those produced in the postcolonial world (she analyzes the films *Rouge* [dir. Stanley Kwan, 1987] and *Haplos* [dir. Antonio Jose "Butch" Perez, 1982]). She notes, "Ghost films that are also historical allegories make incongruous use of the vocabulary of the supernatural to articulate historical injustice, referring to 'social reality' by recourse to the undead." The repressed call for justice is animated through the figure of the undead—the haunting ghost, the vampire. The Lebanese context is one of a civil war, leading to an amnesic peace, overlaid with development and reconstruction, collapsing in the assassination of Hariri and the splintering of the postwar détente, and eventually the devastation wrought by the Israeli attacks in 2006. Put simply, these films prompt the question of "justice" through their imagining of the presence of the undead in this shifting landscape.

Declaring the Death

In *A Perfect Day* (Yawm akhar, 2005) a mother and her son prepare to visit a lawyer to legally declare as dead her husband, who has been missing since some time during the civil war. Both live irresolute and unresolved lives—the son, Malik, suffers a form of narcolepsy which increasingly disrupts his daily life, and the mother, Claudia, still lives in anticipation of the return of her husband, despite the many years that have passed since his disappearance. *A Perfect Day* was produced during and set in the Lebanon of the reconstruction period. In an ironic referencing of the ideals of this period, Malik's work is in property development and construction—the signature economic area of this time.

Codirectors Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have explored the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war in other works, in particular their debut feature film, *The Pink House* (*Al-Bayt al-zahr*, 1999). *The Pink House* was one of the first Lebanese works to specifically explore the tensions that arose between those who sought to reanimate cultural memory of the civil war, and those who saw the renewal and reconstruction of the country as imperative, even when these efforts erased the traces of the war and aimed to remove it from cultural memory. As Ken Siegneurie (2011, 118) has noted, “*The Pink House* provided a nuanced vision of the conflicting imperatives of memory and change.” *One Perfect Day* intimates that the ascendancy of a reconstruction ideology has in fact erased the traces of the civil war—rather, repressed perhaps, they remain in the shadows, and at times are literally unearthed in the course of the rebuilding.

One Perfect Day follows what are apparently the usual quotidian habits of the mother and son: their preparations for the day, their daily tasks, the boredom and quiet that are occasionally punctuated by action, but which seem to always return. While Malik's daytime is occupied with his work, he seems peculiarly antisocial, with few if any friends—other than Zayna, a former lover who now refuses to speak to him. Claudia is largely homebound—she spends most of her time in the small apartment they share off a relatively quiet street. At one point she offers coffee to a group of security guards who guard a notable neighbor, and at another she answers a telephone call from a friend or relative, but otherwise she also seems solitary. Before the lawyer's appointment, Malik visits a work site to oversee progress on the construction of a new apartment tower. At the site he falls asleep, until awoken to hear that workmen have discovered a corpse while digging the foundation. Malik rushes to the location, but rather than go to where the body has been found, he speaks by walkie-talkie to the men on site, asking them if the body dates from the civil war. When they reply that it seems to be much older, he is visibly disappointed. His father's missing body has ignited a quest that is inflamed by the news of unclaimed bodies found. Indeed, it would seem that

bodies of victims of Beirut's various modern conflicts are scattered throughout subterranean strata below the city.

This scene finds reflections in a performance art piece by the Lebanese artist Walid Raad, under his moniker of the Atlas Group. As a purported representative of this organization, Raad performs public talks in the guise of an archivist presenting artifacts and objects collected by the fictional group; many of these directly or indirectly relate to the civil war, and comment upon memory processes and repression of memory in postwar Lebanon. At a performance at PSI's "Greater New York" show in 2005, Raad showed slides of monochromatic blue-green colors, claiming that these were digitally processed extracts of images derived from negatives discovered in the Mediterranean, off Beirut. As the audience strained to see something in the slides, Raad explained that the images were portraits of missing people whose bodies were disposed of in the sea, recovered by the Atlas Group. In the question-and-answer session after the talk, some in the audience attested to feeling as if they discerned a faint outline of faces in the images. In this performance, the haunting absence of the disappeared is evoked impressively, as is the impossibility of representing them—where so much more about the war is a subject of excess: of emotion, of violence, of incomprehensibility, the matter of the disappeared operates as a silence, an empty void, echoed in the hollow reflection of monochromatic slides that filled the screen.

The appointment with the lawyer ends without a final resolution to the matter of the missing father's status (figure 6.3). Claudia has forgotten to bring clippings of announcements that the family had placed in newspapers when her husband first disappeared. Without these, the legal dossier is incomplete. While they each sign the declaration, the lawyer tells



FIGURE 6.3 *Visiting the lawyer* (*A Perfect Day*)

them he will have to await their delivery of the clippings before the matter can proceed. It is unclear whether Claudia has purposefully forgotten the documents, or whether she has erred, but in either case she and Malik leave the office without truly resolving the matter of her husband's legal status. Even the legal route to resolving the wounds of the past is one that in fact does not produce certainty for those affected. The declaration of the father's death has now been issued, but there are still formalities and technicalities that prevent the dossier from being closed. Where Malik had apparently hoped to leave the meeting with the matter behind him, Claudia seems somehow to find further hope in these final unresolved details.

Once they arrive back home, Malik refuses to stay in the apartment with his mother, instead leaving to drive around Beirut aimlessly. As he drives, it becomes clear that he is searching for his estranged girlfriend. He visits her apartment building and, not finding her at home, then drives around looking expectantly at young women he sees on the street. Meanwhile, Claudia is left alone, and has donned the black clothes of mourning for the first time. She tries to call Malik on his cell phone, but he does not answer. Several hours later, at night, while feeling abandoned, she is visited by what seems to be the ghost of her husband. The visitation is shot as a point-of-view from the ghost's perspective. A profile shot shows Claudia sitting in the living room, when she suddenly looks up (figure 6.4). An edit cuts to her looking at the camera with an expression of both fear and recognition. The camera assumes the position of the ghost, and as it pans in a semicircle her fixed gaze follows its movement. The pan stops and she continues to look directly into the lens, eventually raising her outstretched palm toward it in a gesture that closes the sequence (figure 6.5). In this way the scene places the viewer in the position of the ghost and creates an intimate and poignant interaction between the viewer and Claudia. Her fear and desire are intensely magnified by the length of the single shot and by the simplicity of her final gesture, reaching out from the living toward the undead. The scene lacks dialogue or soundtrack music and the diegetic sound is at a minimum, which enhances the visual intensity of the moment.

While the scene marks a transitional point in the narrative, the film intimates that similar events may have occurred in the past. In an earlier scene she tells Malik, "Sometimes I see him, I feel him. You don't. You don't see him, you don't feel him" (figure 6.6). This gap in experience marks the distinction between the mother and son—and allegorizes a generational gap in the manner by which the war is remembered. Where Claudia admits to "seeing" and "feeling" the presence of her husband, Malik is unable to do so. However, he is not free from the haunting affect of the absent father—in his case, his recurrent narcolepsy, which marks his own inhabitation of a



FIGURES 6.4 AND 6.5 *Claudia sees a ghost (A Perfect Day)*



FIGURE 6.6 *Claudia and Malik in the car (A Perfect Day)*

space between life and death, is linked to the specter of his missing father. However, while Claudia may have experienced some contact with her undead husband in the past, this scene raises questions within the trajectory of the film's narrative. What effect will this visitation have upon the legal process to declare her husband dead that moves forward? If and when he is finally declared dead, will the haunting presence be removed from the lives of Claudia and Malik? While Malik, for one, views the declaration as a step that will allow him to reconcile with Zayna, and perhaps will also end his narcoleptic condition, Claudia instead views the resolution of her husband's legal state as falling short in offering her corollary resolutions to her despondency.

These two characters themselves both inhabit a liminal space separating life and death, across which the undead pass. During his narcoleptic fits, Malik is often mistaken as dead: as in one scene where he is pulled from his car by passersby concerned that he has died at the wheel, or in the opening scene of the film where his mother watches him sleep for some time before anxiously leaning over his mouth to check his breathing (figure 6.7). In this way, the film views the absence and presumed death of the father as producing not only a haunting presence, but one that also overshadows and cloaks those who are left behind. Somehow, the suspended status of his father—presumed dead but not yet legally recognized as such—has also prevented Malik or Claudia from joining the world of the living.

The lack of a resolution to the matter of Malik's father's status may symbolically overshadow his attempts to resolve the problems he has been facing. After the meeting with the lawyer, Malik once again attempts to call Zayna, but she refuses to answer his calls. He goes to the hospital to consult

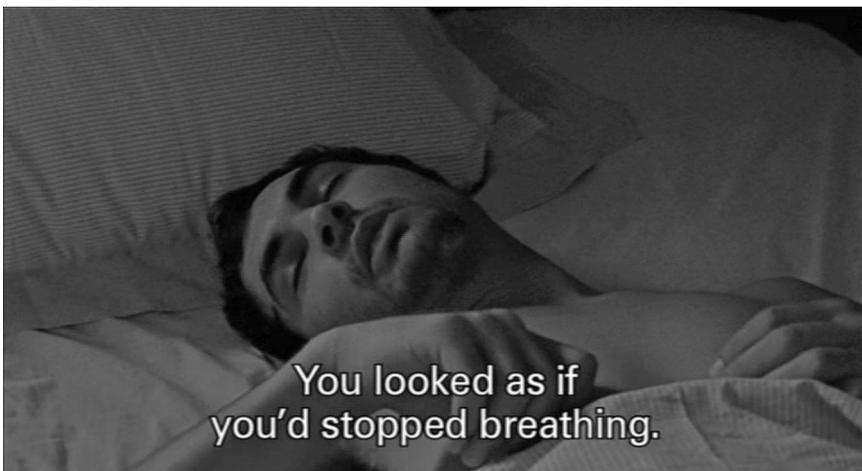


FIGURE 6.7 *Malik awakes from sleep (A Perfect Day)*

a doctor about his narcolepsy, and while in the waiting room there uses a hospital phone to call Zayna, who, not recognizing the number, answers him for the first time. Before she can hang up on him, the first thing he tells her is, "I've signed the papers about my father." Clearly it seems he views the long lack of a clear resolution to his father's situation as a cause of the problems between them, and he is hopeful that by telling her this news they may move toward reconciliation. Later, at night after Malik checks out various nightspots, he finds Zayna with a friend at a club. Approaching them, he is initially rejected by her, and her friend then tells him to leave them alone. Rather than leave the club, he retreats to a corner where he watches them from a distance. His phone rings but it is Claudia calling, so he does not answer. Eventually he slumps over, in a narcoleptic fit. Seeing him asleep, Zayna approaches him. Somehow seeing him in this repose affects her and she begins to caress his head as he slowly awakes. Shortly they leave the club together and begin to drive around Beirut, apparently reconciled. While it appears as if Malik's hopes are to be realized—and thus perhaps the process of recognition of his father's death has opened the door to their reuniting—suddenly Zayna changes her mind, as if she had been possessed, and runs away from the car to disappear into the night. Malik himself had linked the troubles between them to the status of his father, but it is unclear whether their ultimate inability to reunite relates in some way to the fact that the legal process has still not been completed, or if it is rather a sign that the hopes Malik had held were themselves ultimately false. If the latter, it would seem that his problems are due to the issue of his father less than to other unexplored complications—a matter which may allegorize other conditions in postwar Lebanon. Malik, despondent, finds that Zayna has left her contact lens' case behind in the car. He puts her lenses into his own eyes and in a POV shot we see the world as he now does, as indistinct and blurry lights and shapes. In this prosthetic attempt to see things "through her eyes," he instead sees nothing at all. The gap between his "view," framed as it is through his personal burden of familial war trauma, and that of Zayna, who is carefree young woman seeking pleasure and freedom, is signified in the visual register as Malik drives wildly down the highway while blinded by her contact lenses.

A Perfect Day engages with the historical problems of the unresolved civil war—and the claims of injustice that underlie the social trauma that haunts Lebanon—by what Gordon has called a "recourse to the undead." Here, Lebanon is haunted by the missing, the thousands who disappeared during the course of the war with no trace. The absent bodies of the disappeared serve as acute signifiers of all that is unresolved about the war. A family torn apart—missing an active father—is a potent symbol of the postwar nation. The undead lurk behind the layers of dysfunction and neurosis that paralyze

both the war generation and its children, but it is unclear if the ghosts of the war hold a key to finding a way forward.

The film ends with what might be read as a qualified expression of hope. After spending the remainder of the night driving around the city, Malik goes to sleep on a bench by the corniche. He wakes the next morning at dawn, and after getting up and stretching, he limbers up and then begins to sprint along the corniche (figures 6.8 and 6.9). Shaking off his sleep, the motion of running brings to his body a sense of corporeal freedom absent from the beginning of the film. Also, for the first time, the setting and camerawork break free of the gloomy interior locations and static framings that have characterized the *mise en scène*. As Lina Khatib (2007, 106) notes, through most of the film Beirut is represented as “claustrophobic” as well as seeming like “a living nightmare: a



FIGURES 6.8 AND 6.9 *Malik runs on the corniche (A Perfect Day)*

bleak place often shot in the dark.” Here the camera follows Malik as he runs, through a series of fluid takes, before settling on the last shot of the film, a sky filled with migratory birds. The open aspect of these shots—the horizon of the sea, the open sky—breaks with the prior aesthetics of framing and camera movement, to hint at a possible transformation within him or around him.

The somewhat hopeful note that ends *A Perfect Day* is one that is arrived at through traversing the line between life and death. A similar use is made of the notion of haunting, albeit in a rather more facile manner, in the film *Zozo* (2005). Joseph Fares’s tale of war and emigration follows the story of a young boy whose family is killed just as they are preparing to abandon Lebanon to emigrate to Sweden. The first half of the film follows the boy, nick-named Zozo, in his attempts to survive alone in Beirut and make sense of his situation after the death of his parents, while the second half concerns his difficulties as an immigrant in Sweden, living with his grandparents. The trope of haunting is here used as an outlet for Zozo’s attempts to come to terms with his fears. After the death of his parents, in a recurring sequence, Zozo imagines or dreams of himself in a house floating in space, and looking out the window he sees a bright source of light that shines in the darkness. He cries out to the light but receives no response.

Later in the film, in a climactic scene, he confronts a group of bullies on a school playground in Sweden. Just as he is about to be beaten by them, mortar shells begin to rain upon the school and the playground. Zozo stands impassively in the midst of the falling shells while the other children flee and take cover. Suddenly his mother rushes up from behind him and removes him to safety. He asks her to take him with her (thus to cross the line from life to death), but after holding him, she tells him to go back on his own. She then fades away, as do the mortar shells, and Zozo finds himself back on the playground, just as things were before the shelling began. However, instead of instigating a fight with the bullies, he simply walks away from them. The catharsis of the scene and the apparition of his mother mark the transition point from trauma to assimilation, from undead to living.

In this way, *Zozo* represents “a symptom of a culture’s need to ‘forget’ traumatic events while representing them in an oblique form” (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 9). Released in 2005, this film largely participates in the amnesic approach that predominated during the reconstruction period, both through its own refusal to engage with specifics of the war (it is, for example, unclear who may have killed Zozo’s family, what the causes of the fighting may have been, etc.) and its eagerness to portray the trauma of war as fundamentally resolvable—through immigration and assimilation. It is just as noteworthy that 2005 marked the last year of Social Democratic rule in Sweden, and so the film was to be released only months before the ascendance of the right-wing anti-immigrant coalition that assumed office in the 2006 elections. *Zozo* thus fits a cultural context in Sweden, where debates around immigration were

highly politicized, and by representing the traumas of both war and emigration in a resolvable form, the film avoids taking on more difficult discussions around the limitations of assimilation and the experience of marginality among immigrants in Sweden.

Vampire-Healing in the City

The Last Man was also made in the months leading up to the assassination of Rafic Hariri, after which the specter of the civil war once again arose, overshadowing the claims that the wounds of the war had been healed through the projects of reconstruction. The specter would again and more clearly materialize in the form of clashes between Hizbullah and its supporters and militias affiliated with the March 14th coalition in May 2008. The specter also haunted Lebanon during the Israeli war on Lebanon in the summer of 2006, with destruction again spread across the country, with hundreds of thousands of refugees, and thousands of wounded and dead, and ethnic and sectarian tensions again in the foreground of national politics. Presaging these events, in *The Last Man*, Dr. Khalil Shams works at a hospital in Beirut. The film initially outlines a series of vignettes following Khalil through his daily life, beginning with a long series of POV underwater shots coming to reveal the protagonist as he climbs out of the Mediterranean Sea in scuba gear. Khalil is respected by his patients and colleagues, has a girlfriend whom he rarely sees but with whom he communicates regularly by text message, and is part of a group of friends who dine together regularly. However, he nonetheless seems a paradigm of solitude and alienation from his surroundings. In the first sequence of the film, after he has been scuba diving, Zayna, his mostly unseen lover, sends him an SMS: “Always under water?” To which he replies, “Yes, always under water.” In this introduction, we encounter a protagonist defined by his social disconnectedness. Intercut with these scenes of Khalil underwater, shots show police removing a body from an apartment. Later it is revealed that the body is of a young man, bearing a bite mark on his neck, the victim of an apparent vampire attack. The editing is not causal, there is no explicit link between the actions, but as a form of dialectical montage, a mode of relation is set out that links Khalil’s distracted, “under water” state to the discovery of victims of vampires around the city.

A variety of cinematic techniques are employed to explore Khalil’s condition—in particular the use of double exposure. Also, Khalil often is shot through windows that reflect the world outside (figure 6.10), as in one scene where the camera is set outside his car’s windshield and his face is only barely seen through the reflection on the glass. Differing from the alienated framing and screening techniques of Elia Suleiman, discussed in chapter 4, these techniques produce layers that cover Khalil’s face, producing a ghostly effect (figure 6.11). The explicit artifice of the double exposures and layered



FIGURES 6.10 AND 6.11 *Double exposures over Khalil's face (The Last Man)*

shots—which increase and intensify over the course of the film—visually drain Khalil of detail and texture, and mark his progress toward becoming a vampire. The overlaid images signify a loss of identity and intimate the move from the world of the living to that of the undead. The use of this technique for otherworldly effect is not new: double exposure has been associated with the supernatural from before the inception of cinema. As Lisa Starks (2002, 185) notes in discussing an early cinematic rendition of Hamlet, the use of “the cinematic technique of using a double-exposure Ghost tapped into a nineteenth-century myth that photographs were thought to record the ghostly remains or spirit of their subjects.” Additionally, early *Dracula* adaptations such as Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), made copious use of double exposure in attempting to represent the undead as living-but-not.

More victims are found. Khalil crosses paths with these bodies in his work at the hospital. But as with other issues in his life, the mounting number of victims seems not to affect him. Similarly, as he drives through the city after scuba diving in the Mediterranean, the radio intones news of Palestinian civilian casualties of a recent Israeli military operation—again, he displays little emotion or response. In the hospital, a television reports clashes on the border with Israel. He treats his patients and colleagues at the hospital with the same quiet distance, often distracted or lost in thought. In the gap that grows between Khalil and the rest of his world, we begin to sense a link to the vampire attacks—his inability to live among others, to live a life of the living, begin to direct him toward a liminal space, that of the dead.

The film also makes frequent use of reverse POV shots in which Khalil stares into the camera (figure 6.12). While in the ghost scene in *A Perfect Day*, this technique places the audience in the position of the haunting ghost, the shots of Khalil staring into the camera have a different implication. The final employment of this technique—the scene described at the beginning of this chapter—reveals the subject of his gaze to be a mirror, one which does not reflect him. In prior shots there is no reverse shot to also observe what it is toward which Khalil's gaze is directed. Taking the final iteration of this visual motif as a key, the prior uses of this technique also place the audience in a mirroring position, as if complicit with Khalil. The blank quality of his gaze—so different from *A Perfect Day's* staging of Claudia's gaze that signifies desire and terror—indicts the viewer with its lack of provocation or emotion.

While Khalil continues his daily activities, various indications mount to signal his being implicated in the vampire attacks. At a dinner gathering with friends, he slowly grows distracted. As the conversation continues, the



FIGURE 6.12 *Khalil stares* (*The Last Man*)

rainstorm outside ends and a sunbeam shines upon his face. He raises his hand and swears angrily. (His growing hatred of the sunlight bears irony, given that his own last name means “sun.”) From this point, Khalil is unable to go outside without wearing dark sunglasses. He stops going to his office, and refuses to answer urgent calls from the hospital, sleeping in his dark room at day and going out only after dusk. The film ends with a long sequence following Khalil at night as he wanders the streets of Beirut, eventually discovering another vampire whom he follows. When Khalil finally does strike, it appears more as initiation than as habit, as he steps in to suck the blood of a person who has already been killed by the other vampire. In the last shot of the film Khalil follows the other vampire into what may be a larger world of the undead, as he disappears into a desolate and shadowy urban landscape.

The Last Man resists a simple allegorical reading more than *A Perfect Day*. Lacking any coherent signifier for the fragmented nation, the film posits Beirut as a space of dislocation, perhaps no less haunted than other cities. In the one panoramic shot of the city in the film, Beirut is overcast with what seems like an apocalyptic storm (one that resonates with Suleiman’s apocalyptic storm that begins *The Time that Remains*, as discussed in chapter 4). However, Khalil’s slow transformation takes him from being an alienated bourgeois doctor to becoming a man driven by indeterminate needs or impulses, to wandering the streets of Beirut, to eventually accepting his new identity as a vampire. Where *A Perfect Day* intimates, however tentatively, the possibility of a rebirth—a new day—where Malik is able to live a life free of the haunting of his father, *The Last Man* instead closes in the depths of an endless and sleepless night, with Khalil wandering lost into the devastated landscape of a city infested by vampires. *A Perfect Day* envisions a generational shift where the issues of both responsibility and trauma—marked by the ghost of Malik’s father—are left behind. While the move toward a legal recognition of the father’s death results in the appearance of the ghost in Claudia’s presence, Malik moves from the category of undead, signified by his narcolepsy, toward that of the living. Conversely, Khalil’s descent into vampirism at the end of *The Last Man* suggests an unresolved question of complicity and responsibility that draws him from the realm of the living into that of the undead. His disappearance into the night landscape of Beirut is in a mirror distinction to Malik’s dawn awakening on the corniche of the city.

Returning to Witnessing

Just months after the 2006 war, Ghassan Salhab released an experimental video called *Posthume*, a twenty-minute-long meditation on the aftermath of the conflict. The work largely comprises double- or multiply exposed images, often including a face (or back of the head) of an actor overlaid by moving

shots of a camera driving through the war-affected areas of Beirut, or television broadcasts about the war. Nondiegetic voices intone a script of meditative statements that appear to address the question of life from the view of the dead. In the use of double exposure and the attention to the spaces of the city, both evoke *The Last Man*. However, the question of complicity is no longer at the center of the work; this is a work of mourning, of seeking to imagine a venue for the dead to speak.

While the 2006 war must be viewed as fundamentally a different form of violence than much of what characterized the Lebanese civil war (even during the Israeli invasion of 1982), for many in Lebanon the onset of the war brought about a return of traumatic memories of the earlier conflict. Despite ending in just over one month, the hostilities in 2006 unleashed widespread destruction of infrastructure, mass displacements of people, as well as widespread injury and loss of life. As Laura Marks (2000, 22) observes, “The 2006 war did not just irritate the surface of forgetting and distraction so necessary for survival. It viciously tore it away and opened up an abyss that no story can render meaningful.” Given the overall development of Lebanese videography and cinema since the time of the civil war, and given the significant experience that many filmmakers had by now gained in exploring war themes in their narratives, it is not surprising that during and in the immediate aftermath of the 2006 war a plethora of video and film works were produced. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie (2007, 69–70) describes the scene in the months after the war:

In the three months that followed the August 14 ceasefire, more than fifty short films and videos made during or in response to the war were screened publicly at film festivals and in gallery exhibitions in Beirut. . . . Some of the works were shot abroad; others were composed from footage collected in Lebanon during the siege. Some of the authors were artists, while others were amateurs, students, or hobbyists with adequate camera equipment and access to editing software. Hundreds more films were made than shown. Some were projected casually among friends, in homes, and in coffee shops. Untold numbers are still being raked through and refined.

This abundance of visual materials, which spanned from documentary works to art projects that aimed at protesting the war or conveying its horrors to the world beyond Lebanon, to fully fictive works that were staged in the devastated landscapes before the new reconstruction wiped them away, signified Lebanon’s entry into the world of hypermediated cultural memory, and the definitive shift from literary to visual cultural production as the favored representational realm for the formation of cultural memory. Two feature narrative films that were made in the immediate aftermath of the war were *Under the Bombs* (*Taht al-qusuf*, 2007) by Philippe Aractingi, and *I Want to See* (*Biddi ashuf*, 2006) made by Hadjithomas and Joreige, (the codirectors of *A Perfect Day*). The two films are fairly distinct in their film language and

aesthetics, but are both road films that take place with characters who are touring the war-afflicted areas. Since both films were shot in the immediate aftermath of the war, they are in a sense both semidocumentary, in that they include significant material that is documentary footage of the actual devastation brought by the war and they place their actors in settings and scenarios that involve nonactors who are residents or refugees living in the locations that were used for the film.

In *Under the Bombs*, Zayna, a wealthy Lebanese expatriate, returns from Dubai just days after the end of the war, to search for her son and sister who have gone missing during the bombing. She employs a taxi driver, Tony, at the Beirut port to take her south, to the areas most badly hit during the war. At first her relationship with Tony is initially somewhat contentious, as they drive toward the south. They stop at a refugee shelter in Sidon where she looks for her son Karim, and her sister Maha. In the shelter she speaks to refugees who tell her of their experiences in the war and their losses. The refugees in the film are nonactors, their dialog is not scripted. Zayna listens to their stories and watches as volunteers organize activities for the refugee children. The scenes are staged within the actual setting of a refugee shelter, with soundtrack music that adds emotive overtones to the already tragic accounts and scenes. In this way the film develops a film language that is close to melodrama, but whose artifice is undermined by the placement of this drama within a live setting, with nonactors representing their own experiences.

Eventually Zayna and Tony begin to develop a more friendly rapport. At first the subtext of the tension may not seem clear, but to a Lebanese audience there would be little doubt that in part their sectarian identities (she is apparently a Shi'i Muslim while he is Christian—this is never explicitly stated but implied in various ways) may have a role in the tension between them, as well as differences in gender and class. However, the film imputes that through common cultural referents and aspirations—Tony wishes to emigrate as well, for example—they begin to find more of a common ground. Tony breaks the tension between them more than once by mockingly playing a teach-yourself-German cassette tape that he has listened to for years in anticipation of immigrating to Germany. Other national cultural referents, including shared tastes in music and food, also allow for the two to build a tenuous friendship as they continue to search for Karim.

When they arrive at Zayna's ancestral village they find her sister's house completely destroyed—the neighbors tell her that Maha was killed in the bombing, but that Karim was taken away by journalists who were at the scene. Tony speaks to a boy who had been with Karim, who describes the bombings. As he tells his story of hiding in a shelter with Karim, and of how they saw a third friend killed in the attack, his account is edited against a documentary clip of a building collapsing under a bomb. At another point, more documentary footage shows workers exhuming bodies from a mass grave for reburial

by their families. Zayna and Tony circumambulate the coffins as the workers remove them from the earth searching frantically for Maha's body, which is eventually found. Through the trauma of finding and burying her sister, Zayna and Tony tenuously grow closer, as he relates her loss to one experienced by his family. His brother, who was a collaborator with Israel during its occupation of the south until 2000, fled from Lebanon when the Israelis withdrew, and now resides in Israel along with his family, being considered a traitor in Lebanon. Tony's sense of loss has no political space for expression, even as he seems to disavow his brother's political choices. Even though Tony's brother collaborated with the forces that have now killed her sister, the film imagines a sort of reconciliation through her recognition of a shared traumatic past. In the final scenes of the film, their search eventually leads them to a monastery where they have been told Karim was left by the journalists who had rescued him from the village. Once there, they find a boy who is wearing Karim's jacket, but who is not Karim. As Zayna begins to cry, the boy tells them that Karim "stayed under the bombs."

Under the Bombs utilizes an emotive narrative arc that places the two protagonists of the film in a dramatic point of reconciliation through the recognition of their respective traumas. Arguably, their losses are not easily comparable; her sister is a civilian casualty of war, while his brother is neither dead nor in any real sense a victim, as he was a military fighter who chose to support an occupation. Beyond the problematic of this equivalence, the film's melodramatic staging of a scripted narrative over the documentary setting has the unintended result of draining the "real" footage of its affective power, subordinating the scenes of destruction and of rubble to the continuing drama between the protagonists.

By contrast, Hadjithomas and Joreige's *I Want to See* employs a less dramatic and narrative-driven approach, while still adopting a very similar story framework. Here again, the film's protagonists are two individuals who are driving to and around the south of Lebanon, a woman who is a passenger and a man who is her driver, in the aftermath of the war. *I Want to See* is a self-reflexive work, where the protagonists, Catherine Deneuve and Rabih Mroue, are played by actors of the same name, and where the filmmakers occasionally appear before the cameras as they direct the action or make decisions about the trajectory of the film. The film begins with Deneuve in a hotel in Beirut, accompanied by the filmmakers, as they argue with her hosts over her wish to participate in the film by going on a day trip to the south of the country. The camera is stationary and poorly framed, as if shooting discretely from the hip. The handler who objects to her trip is concerned that she will be exposed to danger, or that she may return too late for a gala dinner to which she has been invited. Deneuve replies, "I want to see." The handler asks, "I don't understand. What do you want to see?" Deneuve simply replies again "I want to see. I want to see." After convincing her hosts to allow her



FIGURE 6.13 *Deneuve and Mroue drive toward the south (I Want to See)*

to leave, she sets out on the shoot with her companion-driver, Rabih Mroue, a noted Lebanese artist and actor (figure 6.13). During their initial conversation, she again says, “I want to see.” To which Mroue answers, “Me too, I want to see.” And Deneuve replies again, “You want to see again, I imagine.” Through this repetition in the dialogue, the film asserts the primacy of visual representation in coming to terms with the effects of war, and gives voice to a desire for comprehending these effects visually, on the part of both characters. This dialogue of visual desire is offset by the footage in much of the film which is most often made up of a static shot of the two actors in the front seats of the car. At one point, when the crew exits their cars to shoot footage in the southern suburbs of Beirut, they are prevented from doing so, presumably by security men working for Hizbullah, whose headquarters are in that area. When in the south, the two characters look for Mroue’s ancestral home, but given the destruction are unable to finally find it. In these and other ways, the film suggests that seeing is not always possible, or that even when seeing, one is not necessarily brought closer to understanding.

When, near the end of the film, they arrive at a huge rubble heap where tons of debris have been gathered, Mroue’s voice carries out a sort of epistolary monologue, while the camera tracks slowly, deliberately, over the rubble (figures 6.14 and 6.15):

Do you see? We can’t recognize anything. We can’t distinguish the hall from the dining room, the kitchen from the entrance, the bedrooms from the bathroom. Just stones, all mixed up. It’s like a town that had to be discarded, hidden, buried under the sea. It’s strange. It reminds me of an image. . . . A town washed up on the seashore, like a whale. A dismantled monster that can no longer move, a body decaying, far from the eyes of people.

In the sequence, the camera finally allows the viewer to assume the position of the spectator represented by Deneuve, as if to allow her to finally see.



FIGURES 6.14 AND 6.15 *Viewing the rubble (I Want to See)*

Where before, seeing was difficult if not impossible, here she is allowed to see, but there are “just stones, mixed up,” with no recognizable referents or traces of human spaces remaining. The sight of the debris is monstrous; the town that it once had been is now like the rotting corpse of a beached whale. Most importantly, it is “far from the eyes of people.” This monologue and its end on an abject image, a “dismantled monster” that is decaying, conjures a liminal space between human and nonhuman, or humanity and inhumanity. But it is, again, difficult to view, set away from sight, hidden from the eyes. Here again Hadjithomas and Joreige raise the monstrous figure of the war’s destruction as a form of liminal experience, to unsettle the function of viewing and to reorient it toward a position of justice-seeking.

Both *Under the Bombs* and *I Want to See* use the documentary setting of postwar Lebanon as a staging area for narrative explorations. One presumes in this gesture that the scripting of narrative action somehow presents a complementary or additional depth to the documentary “reality” of the war-torn landscape that both explore. What distinguishes the two films from each other is how they imagine the fictive and documentary working together as a whole. In this way, both works endeavor to position themselves as works of

witnessing—but they present the act of witnessing in significantly different ways. *Under the Bombs* allows the victims of the war to speak for themselves, but circumscribes their testimony and seeks closure for their trauma through its melodramatic framing. *I Want to See*, however, is a work that opens the subject of witnessing to a more critical treatment, hinting that perhaps that which cannot be seen, which is out of eyesight, being monstrous and liminal, affords a truer understanding of the war's traumas.

This discussion has hinted at the reading of these several films as particular reflections of the historical circumstances that separate them, even if only several months separate them. The years 2005–2006 were tumultuous even in the unsettled context of Lebanon's postwar identity. The transition from the reconstruction era, defined by the Solidere project, to a fragmentation of what had been developed of a national consensus that resulted in the Hariri assassination and its aftermath, may be traced in the outlines of these two works, which were then quickly followed by the 2006 summer war and the various representational challenges this new crisis augured. However, it would be too deterministic to limit our readings to such details, for all of these works more broadly should be viewed apart from their immediate historical contexts—none are works of reportage, and all have a tenuous relationship with the use of realism, even when evoking the real. These works, taken as a whole, are representative of the much larger question of how trauma production intervenes in and produces meaning for postconflict Lebanon. Where official discourse on war has been muted or “amnesic,” cultural producers have taken a central role in the projects of producing social trauma in defiance of the irresolute memory of war.

We return to the concern for justice that began this chapter, by returning to the argument that the ghostly, the undead, and the monstrous act upon the witnessed reality and charge them with an unsettled place within the broader framework of trauma production. In conjuring the liminal, these works ask questions about the nature of justice and the impossibility of a just world or the hope of its achievement. During and shortly after the civil war, filmmakers such as Mai Masri endeavored to present first works of witnessing as a form of testimonial to the losses of the war, before shifting to offer works that engaged critically with the cultural memory of the war as it was affected by the reconstruction regime. Where *A Perfect Day's* hopeful ending fits well within the troubled-but-optimistic air of the reconstruction period at its ascendance before Hariri's assassination, *The Last Man*—made about one year later—seems prescient in predicting the return of the haunting effects of the war in the shape of a vampire or vampires who cannot be distinguished from society at large. *A Perfect Day* sets the question of justice in the hands of a new generation, hoping for a new day when the past is finally set to rest. *The Last Man* is more pessimistic, and provokes us to envision a world lacking justice, where complicity and guilt are shared, and where Khalil's hollow

gaze into the camera provokes the viewer to act before sliding into a similar torpor, caught in limbo on the fine line between life and death. The context for such evocations of trauma changed, however, in the year after the production of these films, when the 2006 war demanded a return to a position of witnessing. In this setting, where a film such as *Under the Bombs* sought to subordinate the scenes of destruction and to relegate them to a backdrop function against which an allegorical drama of Lebanese reconciliation was to be staged, other works such as *Posthume* and *I Want to See* positioned the liminal and monstrous at the center of their acts of viewing, and through them synthesized the role of testimony-offering with that of justice-seeking in a single work.