

Bilal Khbeiz

# Gaza–Beirut–Tel Aviv: In Praise of Selfishness and Opportunism

e-flux journal #3 — february 2009 Bilal Khbeiz  
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01/05

In 2006, the Lebanese novelist Hassan Daoud reflected on how some friends, visiting Lebanon in the aftermath of the July war, insisted on inspecting the destruction in Beirut's southern suburb.<sup>1</sup> He declared that he was not capable of accompanying them on these visits – he had experienced the destruction firsthand and saw no need to inspect the damage himself. Such inspection would only complicate an already troubled existence.

In all probability, Daoud was not expressing sentiments unique to him. During those dark days in Beirut, it appeared that comprehending the meaning of the war and coming to terms with its material and cultural consequences rendered the act of inspecting the destruction unbearable. Such inspection would only serve to document a catastrophe that one had already lived through and experienced fully.

To me, this suggests a disparity between the concerns of those of us who live in our part of the world and those of others enthusiastic to our causes. We, in Lebanon and Palestine, in Iraq and Iran, shoulder the burden of dealing with the aftermath of our catastrophes. This disparity is primarily geographic in nature and manifests itself on two different levels.

Witnessing the full impact of the 2006 July War in Beirut, or the 2008–2009 Israeli invasion in Gaza, is a very different sensory experience to that of following it from afar in New York or London. The edited scenes that are broadcast in New York or London are replays of the protracted events to which war subjected Beirut and Gaza. The reverberation of shelling is evidence in itself of death and destruction, yet the lengthy process of establishing the extent of the damage and the identities of the victims delays the broadcast of that event by several hours. Because of this interval, the residents of Beirut–Gaza experience the attacks as two distinct events, one vague and obscure and the other clear and documented. Of the two, the obscure event is undoubtedly the one experienced more sorrowfully.

Emerging from the terrifying experience of the shelling brings about the realization of survival and subsequent delight in knowing that the bombs have chosen others and spared us and our loved ones – an outcome that is palpably illustrated by the sight of the victims. The viewer in New York–London, by contrast, is gripped by a pure form of sorrow for the fallen – a sorrow untarnished by any of the selfish feelings that typically characterize survivors. This pure sorrow allows one to relate to the cause with a clear conscience, and with a courage and an honesty that those experiencing the shelling lack.

Contemplating the nature of these qualities brings to mind Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt, herself a Jewish survivor,

identified the qualities of selfishness and opportunism that survivors display. These sentiments merit reconsideration, for the courage of the survivor is more akin to surrender than to intrepidity. To possess courage under these circumstances requires complete detachment from the victims. Both Ismail Haniyeh and Patrick Seale embody this detachment despite the differences in their positions.<sup>2</sup> Haniyeh remains resolute and holds steadfast under the shelling as long as he does not see himself as a victim. He is firstly a fighter and a defender – a potential victor. He is willing to pay the costly price of such a war, unlike the victims who never sought to die or lose their loved ones. Patrick Seale, on the other hand, can choose to be courageous and feel sorrow for the victims, as he has no reason to be selfish and opportunistic like the survivors. Given this unjust choice, I willingly opt for being opportunistic and selfish – these are qualities that I require far more than courage and pure sorrow.

Pure sorrow needs to be reconsidered as well. It appears to me, perhaps at Nietzsche's suggestion, to be a form of taking pleasure in a superiority over those less fortunate. This creates an insurmountable barrier between the afflicted and those who feel sorrow for them.

So far, I have dealt with the first level of how the disparity between watching war in New York–London and experiencing it in Beirut–Gaza manifests itself. The second level is much deeper and far more complex. Perhaps it emanates from the conceits of journalism, how it exercises its powers of selection and derision. The catastrophe tourist's experience of observing flattened neighborhoods is radically different from that of the Beirut resident. The tourist and the local are worlds apart. They are incapable of relating to each other's experiences – unless we invest the rubble left by the shelling, and the remains in general, with the power of bridging this existential gap.

The neighborhoods that have been shelled and leveled hold remnants of lives under the ruins: pillows and beds, secrets and inner thoughts, books and pictures and scents. The survivors have left parts of themselves under the ruins and are left with the remains of invisible and undocumented lives. Whole chapters of their existence are no longer available to cameras and archives and are out of the reach of any possible authority, even that of inquisitive excavations. These buried episodes now elude the grasp both of *National Geographic* and of artworks as well. It is as if people have been transformed into rats, the creatures that live closest to us humans, yet the most secretive and protective of their affairs. Rats lead un-documented, un-observable lives and relate to human beings only through our

refuse.

The war created a subterranean world for the residents of Beirut–Gaza that is also un-observable, and is consequently beyond the reach of conservationists and “Leftists” who live in secure lands. It is impossible to equate those surveying the devastation with those who have buried parts of their existence under the wreckage. Visitors observe general and superficial scenes and reach conclusions blindly. Ruins encourage guesswork and speculation, and those visitors are incapable of close scrutiny. Any documentation in a situation like this remains as cold as United Nations figures and statistics. The inspector can only estimate the cost of reconstruction and count the number of families that have been displaced. At most, he can imagine happy times that the former residents must have experienced, and unhappy times that they must have been through before the war machine brought the houses down. In any case, he will not go so far as to guess that someone who collected souvenirs from around the world had once lived in one of these flats, and that the personal museum collected from all those cities is now irreplaceable.

A life that resists documentation has been buried, and what remains is the wreckage upon which the visitors construct their ideas and their positions. All that those well-intentioned visitors can do is reward the survivors with the peace that follows destruction as a form of consolation. In other words, they are inviting the survivors to resume their lives without their past, henceforth inscribing it on a clean sheet.

The wreckage conceals secrets that are far more telling than what the surface manifests. In art, the techniques that we use to decipher images insist on the image itself as the ultimate reference – everything we need resides within its frame. A crumbling house prompts us to assume that life once ran its course between its walls, and that this life generally resembled another. The image of a nude model in a painting obliges us to contemplate the lust and desires of the reclining body but does not refer to the old age and demise of that body. The nudes in the paintings of Rubens, Renoir, and Goya have all died. Their bones must have decayed by now, but they remain there in the paintings without names and biographies. The subject of art constantly appears to be mortal and transient, far less durable than the artwork that seeks immortality.

With time, nothing remains of the identities of those models except the brief moments spent posing for the painters. Art is a forceful interruption of a narrative that both precedes and follows the moment of depiction, and thus it asks us to read the stories of the models at that precise moment. In a similar vein, the visitor

inspecting the damage in solidarity with the afflicted, prepared to feel sorrow for them and take a courageous position in supporting them, wishes for the survivors to commence their lives from the precise moment that catastrophe befell them. That sympathizer wants to force the victims into their grief-stricken roles in order to defend their cause at the moment of its most blunt and cruel manifestation.

In this way, the Holocaust became the ultimate courageous and sorrowful stand of the world, after which the Jews were rewarded with the Promised Land – a reward intended to repress all that preceded the Holocaust for Jews and Europeans alike. The Holocaust ultimately assumes the responsibility of erasing what preceded it by way of persecution and discrimination against the Jews at the hands of Europeans. It represents the end of the Jews' sorrows. Consequently, any attack on the Jews in Palestine after the Holocaust is unforgivable. This allows the Jews themselves to persecute and displace others on the pretext that their holocaust has not taken place yet. The right of those others to also become archetypal victims, living without their pre-holocaust history, has hitherto not been granted.

The courageous and sorrowful proponents of the International Left realize the necessity of exposing those with whom they sympathize to minor holocausts in order to adequately defend them. In *Notre Musique*, Jean-Luc Godard re-stages a real interview between the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and an Israeli journalist in which Darwish proclaims that the Palestinians have the fortune and the misfortune of having Israel as an enemy. The world's attention is drawn to the Palestinians only because of the interest in Israel and its history. Nonetheless, Palestinians find it very hard to be recognized as victims precisely because their struggle is with Israel. The moral debates that ensued from the Holocaust made archetypal victims out of the Jews, and enabled them to persecute their enemies on the pretext of self-defense, not least because of the unique position they were granted in modern history (consider the irony of the most powerful army in the Middle East being called the Israeli Defense Forces).

However, citing the Holocaust in this context is not specifically related to what Israel chooses to name its army or the right of Israeli Jews there to defend themselves. It concerns first and foremost the right of the Jewish people not to bear the responsibility for the atrocities committed by their army on the pretext of self-defense. The same logic extends to those resisting Israel and its provocations: no one has the right to hold us responsible for terrorism by claiming that it is a form of self-defense or by

considering it a logical consequence of globalization (a form of fate or compulsion, as Jean Baudrillard maintains).

Nowadays, resistance against imperialism, the Israeli occupation, and the American presence in the region is both cumbersome and catastrophic. We are left to suffer the consequences of the unjustifiable murders committed in the name of resistance. Living in this part of the world makes us either the objects of suspicion or the deranged sufferers of unbearable injustice. Our protectors abroad, then, are those who understand our problems and diagnose our disorders, and they exercise this guardianship by placing us in laboratories and asylums. The injustices that we suffer, according to those protectors, transform us from humans into laboratory mice, similarly to how the transgressions of our enemies changes us from humans into plague-bearing rats. At any rate, holding a Middle Eastern nationality is sufficient to place us under the suspicion of transmitting the modern plague.

The restrictive quarantine in which we find ourselves presents us with only two options. Some declare that they have escaped the epidemic that afflicts their compatriots and go on to write and produce artworks as survivors who witnessed the plague, but avoided it. Others write and produce as convalescents, seeking the help of the world to cure them of their affliction. In this way, we either renounce or repent our pestilence.

It has been observed that merely residing in Beirut–Gaza need not implicate us in its affairs. Immigration here takes many forms. There are at least three different resident-immigrants here: the first observes a demonstration by a million Hezbollah supporters and sees an awesome and captivating spectacle, like a scene in a Kurosawa film. The second is terrified by the crowd, considering it barbarian (in the Foucauldian sense of the term), and consequently seeks cultural asylum in the civilized West on the pretext of not belonging to this multitude. The third chooses to reside here out of adventurousness, not unlike those who live in a jungle amidst rapacious beasts. Those adventurers demand rewards for their excessive courage.

There is a fourth type, a citizen that only feels at home in this city, knowing full well that Hezbollah– Hamas' peaceful demonstrations can easily turn violent, sensing that there will be no cure for the plague if the sane continue to migrate to non-afflicted lands. This citizen glimpses the future of Paris in Beirut's present, a prospect that persists as long as the meaning of citizenship continues to be constructed on top of the wreckage that ensues from the catastrophe,

and not from the lives that have been buried underneath.

The actions of the supporters of the Palestinian people, of the Third World in general, rely on this theoretical framework. During the demonstrations against the Israeli invasion in Gaza, there were many well-intentioned representatives of this persuasion, some of whom defended at length their twisted affiliation to the Third World and their support of its causes and struggles. This affiliation would not have manifested itself in such a manner had there not been a renewed interest in the affairs of the Third World that followed a period of abandonment. Those supporters returned to that cause fully capable of being courageous, sorrowful, and outraged, much unlike their counterparts who remain selfish and opportunistic.

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Translated from the Arabic by Karl Sharro.

04/05

Bilal Khbeiz (1963, Kfarchouba) is a poet, essayist, and journalist. He regularly contributes to the newspapers *Beirut Al Masa'a* and *Al Nahar*, and to Future Television Beirut, among other publications and networks. Published poetry and books on cultural theory include *Fi Annal jassad Khatia' Wa Khalas* (That the Body is Sin and Deliverance), *Globalisation and the Manufacture of Transient Events*, *The Enduring Image and the Vanishing World*, and *Tragedy in the Moment of Vision*.

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Hassan Daoud is a Lebanese novelist living and working in Beirut. He made this admission in an international panel discussion organized by *Documenta 12* in Vienna on November 19, 2006.

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Ismail Haniyeh is the disputed Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority and a senior political leader of Hamas. Patrick Seale is a British writer on the Middle East.

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