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Rabih Mroué:
A BAK Critical Reader
in Artists' Practice

Rabih Mroué: A BAK Critical Reader
in Artists' Practice examines the work
of Mroué (born 1967), an actor, director,
playwright, and artist based in Beirut,
whose complex and diverse practice
spans disciplines and formats such as
music, performance, theater, and visual
art. As one of the key artistic voices in
Lebanon and beyond, Mroué's practice
explores how varied modes of art can
open up a space of possibility in connec-
tion to civic and political imagination.
The reader includes a range of commis-
sioned critical essays, new translations,
and anthologized texts by artists, art
historians, curators, and thinkers.

Edited by Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige
I am Salah el Dine

Just as we were having a quiet cup of coffee with Rabih, and asking for news of his parents, he told us in a slightly hesitant tone that his mother is constantly asking if we're writing a new role for him. That she had said, "they are the only ones who still offer you to work in cinema." We were very surprised to hear that. Rabih confirmed that in fact since he started collaborating with us, he has had no other offers to appear in films. Really? We started to look back on our journey together and on the collaboration we had developed, at once generous and demanding, something closer to a true definition of friendship.

Our first professional meeting with Rabih was in 1999 when shooting our first feature film *Al Bayt el zaher* [Around the pink house], in which we wanted to examine reconstruction in the post-war situation in Lebanon. It was a film with twenty-three main characters, each one having various positions—a film like a question addressed to viewers. It tells the story of two refugee families who were displaced, like a large part of the Lebanese population during the war, and found shelter in a magnificent pink residence that had been abandoned by its owners. Then, at the end of the war, the pink house was repurchased by a real estate developer, who wanted to keep the façade but other-wise transform the building into a shopping center. This set of circumstances was, for us, indicative of the post-war realities in Lebanon, because if the civil wars were fought partly to combat inequality, the period that followed—with its major reconstruction projects—shook that hope and along with it "the dream of changing the world."

In the film, Rabih plays Mounir; it's a character part in the classic sense of the term. Because even if the film does not look for pathos and formulaic emotion, the actors play their roles in a traditional way, trying to merge fully with their characters. And in this particular role, Rabih was hardly recognizable. As Mounir,

he has a very distinctive hairstyle, moves at a slow pace, lives in another world, never says a word. Mounir is a young man, madly in love with a woman called Farah. He passes himself off as a refugee in order to live near her. But instead of running away with him, Farah has to flee from him. After that, Mounir stayed there with his family, shut up in a room, where, using a large picture of Farah, he takes photos of her every day—she continues to live through these images, freezing time. The character is often present but silent, like an incongruous presence. In fact he only speaks once in the film, addressing the camera in a long monologue. In that instance, Rabih (as Mounir) climbs up onto a mobile platform, which makes him float and gives the viewer a strange sensation. . . a bit like he was flying. And despite this device and the strange effect, we had to believe it, to listen to his words. While Rabih's acting was convincing, neither Rabih nor we were entirely convinced by this experience of doing this type of acting. We were all looking for a different kind of acting, but also a different type of story. So we set about writing films together.

From 1999 to 2003, during at least three afternoons a week, we wrote together with Rabih. Ideas kept on germinating. We mimed film scenes for one another, and had some moments of emptiness but also a lot of intellectual stimulus, valuable exchanges, very interesting and entertaining moments. And in this way, we wrote several films, the first one of which was called *Jnoub Deghré* [Straight to the South]. However the liberation of southern Lebanon in May 2000 persuaded us not to pursue work on it, as the film told of a vain attempt at arriving in this region, which was difficult to enter because it had been occupied by the Israeli army for over twenty years.

Later we wrote three short films, which, in our minds at least, should be combined into one long film. Rabih played very

different parts in them. In March 2003, we shot the first of these, *Ramad* [Ashes]. *Ramad* tells the story of Nabil (interpreted by Rabih), a man returning to Lebanon with the ashes of his father, who had died abroad where he went for treatment of a protracted disease. Yet it just so happens that cremation is forbidden in Lebanon, a country governed exclusively by religious laws, lacking a strong civil code. Nabil, the protagonist in the film, cannot experience his bereavement the way he wanted to, having to bow to social rituals and pressures. He wanted to fulfill his father's last wish, to scatter his father's ashes in the sea, near the rocks of Raouché, from which he was said to have jumped off in his youth. But his family insists on burying a non-existent body at all costs. Nabil is torn between the promise made to his father and the accountability he feels toward his family, who make him feel guilty and put pressure on him.

In this film, our work is based on a set-up, a particular way of working: Rabih, besides being one of the authors, is the only person in the film with professional acting experience. The other actors are not professionals and don't have any prior knowledge about the development of the film. They are people we know and who are similar to the characters we have in mind; above all, it is their presence, their "being there" that has affected us. These people had no other task but to look back to a situation that they knew well, which was so completely part of their lives, namely that of giving and receiving condolences. We simply placed them into a situation, a mechanism in which things could happen. And what happened, in part, was that they intuitively made the right gestures, fitting of a situation of bereavement and condolence, directly recalling familiar, practised rituals. This unscripted situation prevented us from knowing beforehand exactly what we would be filming, so we were also inspired by the situation itself, the reality we encountered and

what surprised us and eluded us about how it unfolded. In our filmmaking practice, it is essential not to attempt to reproduce this reality, but rather to immerse ourselves in it. In fact many of the shots that crop up in the film are what we would call "stolen"— taken without the actors even being aware of the camera.

Various events inspired this film. First, it drew upon a situation taken directly from our lives—namely the disappearance of Khalil's uncle, who was kidnapped during the civil war and is still missing (as are 17,000 other people), his fate unknown. At that time, we had just attended a ceremony for him, intended to give some kind of closure, which was like a "burial" but in the absence of the body. One could say that in part *Ramad* came out of the personal experience of bereavement and the days filled with condolences that go with it—the experience of the ritual of an uninterrupted stream of people who come to express their sympathy for one's loss. Then there was the fact that Lina Saneh, Rabih's artistic collaborator and wife, had insisted that, when the time came, she wanted to be cremated (she even made a performance based on this request, entitled *Appendix*, in 2007), which threw up difficult logistical questions for Rabih.

The film deals with two central subjects, the emergence of the individual in a community and the concept of latency, here evoked by the absence of a body. This absence gives the disappearance a certain latency, and makes it difficult to believe. Understood from the perspective of Lebanese society, and the memory of the thousands who remain missing even as the civil war is over, for us this raises the issue of the body, and how its presence is often necessary for the community to heal and regroup after a conflict, a catastrophe. With Rabih, we looked for a new way of incarnating this body, of reappropriating both our bodies and those of the others. Rabih has written a lot

about this notion of bodies conditioned by war, by abruptness— the accident that can happen at any moment, all of a sudden and in every place. Our bodies record this tension, and after- wards, it is no longer possible to act as one has before, as if the body was also marked by the conflicts, totally changed by it. Rabih's performance in *Ramad* acknowledges that impact in his mutism and in the way his body evolves. He embodies in his acting the emergence of a particular individuality, a singularity in the middle of a communitarian society, inherited by years of sectarianism and feudalism, where it is hard to exist for oneself.

When we think of this film, it's about states, bodies, and pres- ences that come to life under Rabih's eye, the way he takes on life, takes on the bodies again. . . We created situations, making the spectator, in a close, physical way, feel the invisible, the latency, the absence but also everyday life. *Ramad* is an incar- nation of all this, as is *A Perfect Day*, a fictional feature film we directed in 2005, in which we wanted Rabih to make a totally essential appearance, even if he only had to be present for just a few minutes in the film.

During this period, between 2000 and 2004, in Beirut we got together with a group of artists every Tuesday (such as Walid Sadek, Bilal Khbeiz, Tony Chakar, Marouan Rechmaoui, Lina Saneh, Walid Raad, Fadi El Abdallah, and others). Rabih was also closely involved. It was a place for exchanging, for sharing, for discussions, for study. The subjects developed there often related to the political situations we experienced in particular moments. At that time, we held on to the idea of sharing and exchanging, of working together. There was no market for art; in fact the very idea of a market was far from our minds. We were not represented by any galleries, and travelling around with our work was not a priority. Displaying our work in situ was our prime motivation, because we wanted to question the territory in which we were operating.

Our relationship with Rabih is a natural extension of that approach, infused and invested as it is with this sense of sharing an idea, transmitting it, circulating it, and exchanging it. In our works, there are ideas, characters, thematic lines that cross each other like communicating vessels... It's about quoting, referring to thoughts, to concepts, to each other's words. Among the three of us it's as if, in a certain way, ideas, images, and texts escape, and are snapped up in joyful kind of way, like a reaffirmation of our parallel paths rejoining, or like a form of recognition, a reunion after everyone has gone their own way for a while. We are far from being attached to the "paternity" of an idea or a concept or of a petit bourgeois attachment to complete authorship; we think of ourselves as a sum of encounters, discussions, shared ideas... That's what unites us too, and what we are addressing—always a formal study of the medium we use, but also political subjects linked to the context in which we work and which inform that very context. With Rabih, it's also as if the ego goes into a sleeping phase. We have the habit of getting together to put forward our ideas and our current research, and occasionally dismissing each other, destroying the other's work without either side taking exception to it. Someone says, "*Mich Zabta*"—it's not working—and together we look for an alternative. It's as simple as that. We are there to drive ourselves forward, to prevent ourselves from falling into laziness or repetition. Lying is difficult if there are three of you, and in any case it's more difficult than lying to yourself.

But maybe we should get back to Rabih's mother and her disappointment. Is it true that Rabih is never offered movie roles anymore? Has he forgotten that around 2004, he was asked to read for the part of the historical figure Salah el Dine (more commonly known in the western world as Saladin, a twelfth-century warrior and Arab Sultan) in a Hollywood film made by

a great director? That was an important role. For his "audition" Rabih had to read some lines in front of a camera and have the recording sent by post. He asked us, Lina, and Akram Zaatari to help him record this performance. "I am Salah el Dine"—these were the first words of the text that Rabih had to interpret in front of the camera. He tried to play the character and we tried to direct him. Rabih's words and the fact of being there, trying to play this part in an epic manner, following the expectations of the director, was far from what we (Lina, Rabih, Akram, and the two of us) wanted to achieve. We were always working toward artistic creation, working ceaselessly beyond identification, seeking to get away from the classical narrative strategies, suggesting new ways of playing parts, and imposing new strategies for images. We had to believe this could be possible. But how? It's Rabih who was there, he, who usually grabs the "I" in his performances, in order to say: "I am Rabih Mroué." We kept on acknowledging him. And that might be the explanation. Should we risk saying that to Rabih's mother? Should we tell her that Rabih may not have had any other offers for parts in other films because bit by bit, Rabih's work as a performer has become so much more important, so much more characteristic of himself? That Rabih pre-exists in any character that can be suggested to him? Together, we went through various stages of acting with Rabih: from the incarnation of the character in *Al Bayt el zaher*, to an individual and his emergence in *Ramad*, and finally to a moment of him playing himself in our 2008 feature film *Je veux voir* [I Want to See].

After the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon, we felt lost, no longer knowing what to write, what stories to tell, what images to show. We asked ourselves: what can cinema do? In the face of this war of such uncommon violence, faced with spectacular television coverage, with images that deny us as individuals, that deny our faces, after that, what kind of images could we

produce? We felt the need to resort to history. We imagined the encounter of two figures, two unique stories: that of Catherine Deneuve and that of Rabih. Catherine represents the history of French cinema, of auteur cinema, and a conception of fiction that we wanted to invoke in order to help us recover the possibility of creating cinema as a form of resistance. By contrast, Rabih's face was emblematic of our own history, and that of our generation of artists and filmmakers and the way we were trying to work in Beirut. As a performer, always innovative, rethinking theater and performance, Rabih embodied this history of contemporary art in which we have also taken part since the end of the civil war. And intense artistic activity was dealt a severe blow during the war of July 2006—a war that we experienced as an attack against our contemporaneity.

Je veux voir tells the story of Rabih and Catherine's "encounter," during which they went together to Bint Jbeil, Rabih's home village, where he had not returned since the Israeli attack on the South of Lebanon, and which had been heavily bombed. It spans the length of the encounter, unfolding for real in front of our cameras. We follow its development from the very beginning, in front of the hotel where they meet for the first time, throughout the journey to the village. The encounter is also rendered visible through the framing devices we use in the film itself; Catherine and Rabih begin by looking on, side by side, together but separated by the contours of the frame.

In Je veux voir, images merge with fiction continuously, relentlessly, and that is what we hoped for; to create a sense of fiction, to see if it will emerge from where violence and the weight of the real are present to a degree that documentary can seem like a unique recourse, the only possible answer to this situation. When the weight of the real is too heavy, too overwhelming, fiction becomes difficult and is continuously burdened with

questions of ethics. At what distance should the camera stand from events? What kind of frame and how close can the shot be so as to avoid instrumentalizing victims, reality, and producing affect? How can we have faith in our images?

And what parts could Catherine and Rabih play that would be believable, if not playing themselves? (And what does that really mean, playing your own part, playing yourself?) Both of them have a special way of being in the film in terms of presence: there is Rabih as himself, in his own body and that of Catherine, as a cinema-body, a body of fiction. And then there are their faces. Catherine's face and Rabih's face do not show, they point. And this pointing is redirected to the spectator. The focus is on the other person, the one who is looking. Catherine and Rabih frequently look at the camera, looking for that other. As philosopher Jacques Rancière has written (in an article in Les Inrockuptibles (December 2008)), here we are trying to "shift the focus" of "the representation of the Lebanese as eternal victims of war." We are not only interested in "images of war but in what war does to images," to representations, even of ourselves and of our singularity, embodied here by these two unique people. As a result of her being a celebrity, by virtue of her familiarity, Catherine's face emanates an aura that allows at once identification as well as a distance. Her face is like a screen, where the spectator projects thoughts and emotions. And while she allows the other to self-project onto the screen, she nonetheless does not impose her own emotions. It is not a matter of what she sees, but rather what she allows to be seen. Borrowing a famous line from Alain Resnais's 1959 classic Hiroshima mon amour, "she did not see anything/she saw everything."

And what of Rabih? Is he expected to see? Here Rabih, like Catherine, becomes an icon of sorts. He becomes himself in

this role, and his presence somehow culminates in the ruins of the village, where Catherine, who cannot find him, twice calls him by his first name "Rabih."[1] In this situation Rabih intuitively knew how to strike the right pitch, to avoid over-acting. He lent himself to becoming a vector and screen for some spectators who might have felt more at ease in identifying with him. Furthermore, his face embodied our own quest to reconcile with this particular trauma of the 2006 war, his features rendered the experience of the horror more legible. Rabih accepted to mediate something of what we are, in addition to what he conveys about himself. Befriending, encountering, and relating to the other—a defined other, and not some abstract figure incarnating a victim with whom identification is difficult—is reaffirmed in this film.

In the car, side by side, Rabih and Catherine return to Beirut from the ruins of Bint Jbeil. They appear in one frame, but they don't really look at each other—the camera underlines their separation. Two faces in constant correspondence. Two faces, each experiencing and thinking in turn, in order to take up philosopher Gilles Deleuze's parallel questions: "What's the matter?" and "What are you thinking about?" The former is a case of what Deleuze calls "facialization" or "visageification"—the face as a "reflexive and reflected unity"—while in the latter, faciality is a "movement caught in an intensive series." Deleuze explains how affect amplifies the reflexive power of the face by comprising two elements: the firm qualification of a white space but also the intensive potentiation of what can occur in it. "What's the matter?" and "What are you thinking about?" Two questions that beckon answers.

1   Rabih later went on to make a work of his own based on this moment, the installation *Je veux voir* (2010), which shares its title with our film.

Although Catherine and Rabih share the frame in close-up shots, often nothing follows these close-ups. There is no explicit shot to "explain" what they are thinking or feeling. They meander side by side, gradually sharing the frame with an empty space in their midst in the hope that the spectator will actively appropriate it. In the end they are reunited by one of the grand motifs of classical fiction cinema, namely shot/countershot, used for the first time in the film. Catherine is at a gala, she is in another setting, she looks for Rabih. She finally sees him, right then, suddenly, the shot/countershot, Catherine/ Rabih/Catherine/Rabih unfurls. It is the affirmation of their faces as actors, the return of the story, the return of the fictional possibility, the fiction after the catastrophe. They become full-blown actors again.

Finally, beyond the subtlety of the interplay in *Je veux voir*, there may have been a more direct way of bringing back Rabih to the status of a fictional character, making him part of a more traditional narrative. We've thought about this, and here's a suggestion for him. We already mentioned that between 1999 and 2003, we wrote three short films together with Rabih. One of them was *Ramad*, but there were also two others.

The third film we wrote in detail, and although we never filmed it, we continue to think of it as a very interesting study on transmission and recognition. Maybe bringing it up here is also a way of reminding Rabih of this film that the three of us wrote. Maybe it could be interesting to work on it again, getting together to think, to laugh, to share a possible territory of art, of cinema. Working together, echoing the desire of director Jean-Luc Godard, attempting to try to make art and film in a political way rather than making political art or film.

So, here, the treatment (in progress):

A boat ploughing through the waves. It's early morning and it's cold. An old man is rowing. At his side is a man wearing a tracksuit, with a hood over his head. He is shivering a bit. They arrive at a large and high rock about fifty meters high, known as 'The Raouché.' The man gets out. He waves to the old man to leave him there and go. The latter appears to hesitate, but the man again motions him to leave and to keep quiet at the same time. The old man ends up leaving. The other man climbs up on the rock. He hesitates. His movements are unsteady but he climbs as if he knows the path well. He turns around for a moment. He is already high up. He starts climbing again. He arrives at the top of the rock. He stands up straight and catches his breath. He looks at the sea and how high the rock is. He feels a bit cold and seems lost in thought. He gets close to the edge of the rock, then moves back a moment before returning to the edge.

Three cars arrive at top speed and park in front of the rock. A family, made up of a dozen men, women, and children, and an old lady get out. They rush towards the barrier separating the path from the sea. All look at the man, still standing on top of his rock. Then, suddenly, he slowly starts undressing, taking off his tracksuit, until he is only wearing his shorts. He folds up his things and arranges them quietly. With his naked torso exposed, he looks out to the sea for a moment. He is in place; he gets ready to jump. Time passes slowly but he stays in the same position. A voice, as if from nowhere, says, 'Have faith in God! Jump! Don't be afraid!'

The members of the family are now nearer to the rock. They are standing at the edge of the water, a few meters away from there. They stand, waiting anxiously, joined by a group of curious onlookers. A man, the father, advances towards the sea. He shouts in the direction of the man perched on the rock. 'Imad, my son, jump! What are you afraid of? Jump. All your brothers jumped! Fady jumped, Jamal jumped, even Khalil jumped! Your uncles' sons jumped too! I jumped, your uncle Ahmad jumped, your uncle Nassib jumped, your grandfather jumped, your grandfather's grandfather jumped! What are you afraid of? Jump!'

The mother looks at him and then shouts: 'You put us all to shame! You put God to shame! You have become a brute and you are hesitating again! Look at your little brother, even he jumped! For the love of your mother, jump! Jump, in God's name!'

Imad, the man on the rock, looks in their direction and seems encouraged by their words. He shouts (suddenly enthusiastic): 'I'm going to jump! I'm going to jump!'

Imad is in position; he's going to jump. He looks down into the black depths of the sea, frightening and appealing. The family and the gawkers look at him, gripped by what is about to happen. . . Will he jump?

Yes, will he jump? Will he dare to throw himself off the top of the Raouché, from fifty meters up, to fall into this dark sea? Which will be the one of the two who will jump, Imad or Rabih?

(Translated from French by Ditta Pater)