

6. Martyrs and Other (Un)Dead in Beirut and Beyond

In this book, I investigated how artists reveal the construction of the martyr and of other (un)dead figures. I did this primarily through the case study of Rabiḥ Mroué's play *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* (2007), but also by situating *Nancy* in relation to other artworks, mostly created by the Lebanese Post-War Generation, to martyr posters of the Wars, and to images of the dead who were on the walls during the time of writing, namely the sectarian martyrs, the martyrs of the thawra, and the dead from 4 August.

6.1 *Nancy* and the Construction of Images of Martyrs

Nancy is an artwork of the Post-War Generation and exhibits the characteristics usually ascribed to these artists who started making art after the Wars, many of whom are internationally recognised today. By appropriating posters from the Wars, the play makes use of archival aesthetics, and via the anecdotes told, which are inspired by real people but also by literature, it blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction. Furthermore, *Nancy* questions notions of truth via its use of the photographic image; for example, it presents images of the living as images of martyrs. By showing us that all sects used the figure of the shahid for similar purposes, the play does not side with one faction but rather questions ideological narratives.

Mroué's career is also typical of the Post-War Generation. He started his artistic practice after the end of the Wars, when there was no substantial funding for the arts or infrastructure in Beirut. In 2007, when *Nancy* was staged, Beirut, as an art hub in the region, was on the rise, and soon after it thrived. Today, Mroué is a professional and internationally acclaimed artist who lives in Berlin and is represented by Sfeir-Semler gallery. Several publications on Mroué's work have appeared in recent years, but most focus on works other than *Nancy*, such as *Inhabitants* and *Three Posters*. In contrast, I have put the focus of this book on *Nancy* because it, more than his other works, challenges ideas that place the martyr in an Islamic or 'terrorist' context.

I made clear that we can approach *Nancy* from a different perspective than that employed by other writers, who have generally seen the play as a reflection on the memory of the Wars, chronicling the history of the Wars or as addressing trauma

caused by the conflicts. In contrast, I contend that *Nancy* does not reveal previously unknown historical facts, as the histories of the Wars are generally known. Furthermore, I reject the idea that the makers of the play act as artist-psychologists who work to treat trauma.

In my reading, *Nancy* challenges the ideas and representation of the martyr and demonstrates how fabricated remembrances of the deceased are employed in the context of visual politics. When read as an interaction of text and image, the play reveals the construction of the martyr poster, the usages of the shahid's image in connection with the emotions it elicits, the placement of the martyr between fact and fiction, and the intertwining of the shahid with time. By selecting underlying images of various parties for the remakes of the posters, *Nancy* demonstrates that the martyr posters of all sects involved in the Wars have the same basic structure.⁷⁹¹

A death is constructed as a martyrdom only if a faction is interested in elevating it to a form that is higher than other deaths. This becomes clear when the martyrs are contrasted with Lebanon's missing, who also died under violent circumstances but who, unlike the shuhada, were not allowed onto Beirut's walls in poster form; this is reflected in *Nancy* when Lina's disappearance is represented via a blue monochrome instead of a martyr poster. Also, not all martyrdoms are remembered equally, and shuhada can be divided into ordinary and celebrity martyrs. *Nancy* addresses this fabricated hierarchy by showing Bachir and Hariri on all four screens simultaneously.

The militias want to possess the image of the shahid, which becomes a currency. In this way, posters are used by the warring factions to show off how much human capital they have paid for their cause, as *Nancy* reflects by excessively showing party logos. Therefore, it is usually not of primary relevance who it is that is depicted; what is usually most relevant is that a face and a specific logo are visible in the poster.

Emotions are attached to martyr posters, which are used by the militias and today's parties to turn the picture into a call to arms and into an advertising image that tries to persuade men, in particular, to enter a militia. Especially the hyper-masculine format holds the promise that by joining the military group, one can turn into the ideal man, shown in the poster. By depicting exaggerated traits of Rabi'h's, Ziad's, and Hatem's manliness, the play caricatures the hypermasculine martyr. However, on the textual plane, *Nancy* reveals that heroic martyrs exist only in their images. In actuality, they were human beings who were able to feel emotions such as fear and love.

791 However, by not including a member of the PSP, *Nancy* probably unwittingly reflects that Druze martyrdom has been rarely addressed in research.

The fabrication of the male hero martyr can be linked to the discussion about the Martyrs Statue in the 1950s, when Hoayek's monument was not considered heroic enough and was replaced by Mazzacurati's statue that shows the martyrs, who are represented, as in *Nancy*, in the form of three men and only one woman. The three male and one female protagonist in the play reflect the reality of the *Wars*, in which significantly more men than women were venerated as martyrs. By cross-dressing Lina, who is shown with attributes usually restricted to male martyrs, *Nancy* reveals that gender is performed in martyr posters.

Likewise, truth is constructed in images of shuhada. By announcing living actors as martyrs and by re-using the same photograph for different deaths, *Nancy* reminds us that truth claims in martyr posters should always be questioned. They could be, like the shahid's story, fragments of a whole or simply wrong, even if anecdotes and images of martyrs travel through decades.

Time is inherently inscribed in the image of the martyr. Shuhada died in the past but are still on the walls of the present. Yet, unlike Murr Tower and Holiday Inn, which in *Nancy* point to the non-linearity of past and present, martyrs are not only revenants but also arrivants who carry an unfulfilled dream for the future, which is the domination over Lebanon by the group for which they died.

Although *Nancy* does not fully explore the notion of the Derridean spectral ghost—and I have argued that the sectarian martyr can be understood as such—the play nevertheless exemplifies that the martyr is on the threshold between life and death because when the protagonists die they quickly return to life. Therefore, there is no set boundary between being dead and being alive in the play. Today, as *Faces* by Hadjithomas/Joreige illustrates by re-tracing the fading image of the martyr, the shuhada appear in a different form, not as flesh-and-blood beings but as images. As long as their pictures are on the walls, the martyrs, via their spectral presence, are both dead and alive. As *Faces* shows us, it seems that the martyrs can only be laid to rest when they are not glorified or demonised and are instead accepted for what they are: hauntings of the past and the future that disturb the present.

6.2 Old and New Pictures of the (Un)Dead: Beirut 2020–23

During the time of writing there were mainly three types of dead on the walls: sectarian martyrs, martyrs of the thawra, and those who died in the explosion. Aside from new technical developments and minor changes in colours and symbolism, the anatomy of the sectarian martyr poster has remained the same as it was in the posters that were made during the *Wars* and then reflected in *Nancy*. However, the thawra has brought a new mode of iconicity to the martyr—namely, that of an everyday citizen. Images of the dead of the blast, in contrast, follow the anatomy