Jalal Toufic

All the mirages he saw in the desert were of ruins.

I along with my two siblings and my mother deserted the family apartment during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Did this make the apartment a ruin? Yes, but not because it was severely damaged and burned during the last days of the offensive: even after it was restored, it remained a ruin. The usual explanation of why what was damaged during the continuing civil war was most often not fixed or replaced is that people were reluctant to spend a large sum on what could any moment be damaged again or totally destroyed. But should we not invert the way we consider what was taking place? It was because these houses had become ruins by being deserted that the war got extended until they began to turn explicitly into ruins, to manifest their being already ruins. Maybe the refusal of the Bustrus family to sell their house (Jennifer Fox's *Beirut, the Last Home Movie*) was due less to their obstinate nostalgia to never part with it, and much more to an apprehension that were they to sell it, it may be more readily deserted in a situation of intensive bombing by those who bought it, this ushering in and completing its becoming a ruin. Will we one day learn how to live in a place without dwelling in it, so that the act of deserting it would not turn it into a ruin?

"The places I showed in *India Song* were on the verge of ruin, they were unconvincing, people said that they weren't habitable. But in fact if one looked closely at them, they were not so uninhabitable.… In *Her Venetian Name in Deserted Calcutta* these places are definitely uninhabitable."[1] True? False?

— False, since in war-devastated Beirut many people lived in houses even more destroyed than those shown in *Her Venetian Name in Deserted Calcutta*. The real uninhabitable buildings in Beirut were the ones whose construction was interrupted by the unexpected hike in the exchange rate of the dollar in relation to the Lebanese pound.

— True, since the actors of *India Song* do not inhabit the characters who inhabit these places. "In *India Song* the actors proposed characters but didn't embody them. Delphine Seyrig's fantastic performance in *India Song* came about because she never presents herself as someone named Anne-Marie Stretter but as her far-off, contestable double, as if uninhabited, and as if she never regarded this role as an emptiness to be

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[1] Marguerite Duras, *Marguerite Duras*, contributors, Joel Farges et al., trans. Edith Cohen & Peter Conner (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987), 87.

enacted."[2] One of the risks of such a performance that introduces the double is that it is now the film itself that has to be double, that has a double: *Her Venetian Name in Deserted Calcutta*. And if the appearance of the double signals imminent death, then the latter film is not so much the portrayal of the death of the people and places of *India Song* ("the swallowing up by death of places and people is filmed in *Her Venetian Name in Deserted Calcutta*"[3]) as the death of the previous film itself, of *India Song*. And "let the cinema go to its ruin."

Ruins: places haunted by the living who inhabit them. When the Lebanese installation artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige write in their introductory note to their piece "Where Were You Between this Dawn and the Previous One?", "We have met, we have dreamt Sarkis, Aida, Samer, Madam Habra, Elia and the others. Through their accounts, we aim to illustrate two faces of reality, the one with destroyed buildings … where thousands of people and refugees used to live and continue living, and the other one with a family house which has been left after the owner's death. Occupied uninhabitable areas, and deserted habitable areas,"[4] should we not take their "we have met, we have dreamt Sarkis … and the others" as indicative of the sort of uncertainty regarding whether one is dreaming that besets one on encountering a specter?

The ruin is not desecrated by the vampire, since he is not really there while he haunts it, as shown by his failure to appear in the cracked mirror at that location.

One has to see the disintegration of statues and ornamentation to know that it is precisely because it contains its memory in itself that organized matter cannot recreate the present. And that on the contrary it

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[2] Ibid., 103. For an antithetical, but equally interesting approach, one where there is a definite incarnation, one has to look at the films and aesthetic of one of Duras' favorite filmmakers, Robert Bresson. Bresson's models are exempt *de jure* from reincarnation. Humbert Balsan, who was Gauvain in *Lancelot of the Lake* (1974), reported: "It is precisely on finishing the post-production, that is the post-synchronization, and while saying goodbye to Bresson, that he told me: Above all, don't ever again work in cinema" (Philippe Arnaud, *Robert Bresson* [Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1986], 147). Thus I am disconcerted that Jacques Rivette would use Balsan, whose first screen appearance was in that Bresson film, in *Noroît* (1976)—subsequently, being no longer a model but an actor, it was appropriate for Maurice Pialat, Samuel Fuller and others to use Balsan; or that Jean Eustache would use Isabelle Weingarten, whose first screen appearance was in Bresson's *Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1971), in *The Mother and the Whore* (1973)—again once she was no longer a model, it was appropriate for Ruiz, Wenders, Manoel de Oliveira and Schlöndorff to use her; or that François Truffaut would use Jane Lobre, whose first appearance on the screen was in Bresson's *A Gentle Creature* (1969), in *The Green Room* (1978); or that Godard would use Anne Wiazemsky, whose first screen appearance was in Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar*, in *La Chinoise* (1967)—after which it was appropriate for Pasolini and Garrel to use her; or that Alain Resnais would use both Roland Monod, whose first screen appearance was in Bresson's *A Man Escaped* (1956), in *La Guerre est finie* (1966), and François Leterrier, whose first screen appearance was also in Bresson's *A Man Escaped*, in *Stavisky* (1974); or for that matter that Bresson himself would use Jean-Claude Guilbert, whose first appearance on screen was in Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar*, again in *Mouchette* (1967)—after which it was appropriate for Godard to use him in *Week-End* (1967). Bresson models: Maurice Beerblock, Jean-Paul Delhumeau, Charles Le Clainche, and Roger Treherne in *A Man Escaped*; Florence Carrez, Jean Darbaud, Philippe Dreux, Jean-Claude Fourneau, Jean Gillibert, Michel Herubel, Roger Honorat, Marc Jacquier, E.R. Pratt, and André Régnier in *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962); Philippe Asselin, M.C. Fremont, Walter Green, Nathalie Joyaut, Jean Rémignard, and François Sullerot in *Au Hasard Balthazar*; Laelita Carcano, Nicolas Deguy, Geoffrey Gaussen, Régis Hanrion, Robert Honorat, Tina Irissari, and Antoine Monnier in *The Devil Probably* (1977); Didier Baussy, Michel Briguet, André Cler, Marc-Ernest Fourneau, Bruno Lapeyre, Christian Patey, Vincent Risterucci, and Béatrice Tabourin in *L'Argent* (1983).

[3] Marguerite Duras, *Marguerite Duras*, 87.

[4] *Specimen* #4 ("Habiter/Live in"), January 1998 (Wissous, France: Éditions Amok), 68.

is voices which disappear, which are over (voices-over in this sense also) almost instantly and hence have no memory (of their genesis and dissolution) that can recreate the present. From *India Song* to *Her Venetian Name in Deserted Calcutta*, while the buildings and material objects became older, the voices did not.[5]

How provincial 1992 Beirut would be were it not for its war and civil-war ruins. Through becoming ruins, some buildings that were landmarks of pre-war Beirut are now its labyrinthine zone. What is site-specific about Lebanon? It is the labyrinthine space-time of its ruins, what undoes the date- and site-specific.

The demolished house left its marks on the walls of the adjoining building.[6] In these houseprints, one witnesses the inside turned into an outside. One can imagine a Cronenberg character living in an apartment facing such a wall who one day, on coming home from work, sees that the building with such a wall has been demolished: that same day symptoms of the drive to turn the inside outside begin to manifest themselves in him.

It is in war-damaged areas that the disjunction between the street and the buildings lining it become the clearest, and this even when the street framed by the destroyed buildings is filled with bomb-punctured potholes and burned, overturned cars, for while buildings can become ruins thus labyrinths, streets cannot.

Suddenly one comes across a bas-relief in a war-destroyed facade, and it is as if one has made an archaeological find. But it is not really an *as if*: such objects are truly, albeit possibly transiently, archaeological. The war-damaged city center is, at least transiently, part of the archaeological sites of Lebanon—as much a part of it as Baalbek, which is through its colossal structures (mainly temples) one of the most impressive examples of Imperial Roman architecture, and which contains the Mameluke mosque of Ra's al-'Ayn and the remains of a medieval city. In 1992, Dima al-Husayni, then a fifth-year architecture student at the American University of Beirut, went, as part of an excursion by her class, to the destroyed city center, before the sandbag barricades were cleared and the area officially opened. The duty to look at the buildings from an architectural perspective and to position them within a mental map while the different regions were being mentioned ("This was Sūq at-Tawīla. This was Bāb Idrīs …") entered into conflict with the emotional reverberation of these names, and the second-generation memories, imbibed from her parents, they elicited. The too-many stimuli with which she had to deal during the excursion left the whole episode in abeyance, making it very difficult to take stock of what occurred. Later, in her home, she tried to recall what she saw. Instead of the destroyed, deserted city center, it was the city center of the memories of

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[5] The voice-over in Duras functions as either:
1. An ahistorical, unworldly irruption in the radical closure delimited by the temporal end of the world (*Le Camion* ["Look at the end of the world, all the time, at every second, everywhere"], *Her Venetian Name in Deserted Calcutta*). Had I been offered to produce a science-fiction film on black holes, I would have asked Duras to write and direct it, suggesting for possible title: *Cygnus X-1 Song* (such a film would certainly have been as uncharacteristic of the genre as Tarkovsky's *Solaris*). In *Her Venetian Name in Deserted Calcutta*, the two unworldly female voices-over talking from the end of the world juxtapose with the mundane gossip of the guests at the reception.
2. A voice-over-witness that reports on what is to the other side of a trauma's event horizon.
3. A voice-over reporting the monadic unfolding of information at the end of the world in the form of the event horizon.

[6] Deidi von Schaewen, *Walls* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

her parents, the colorful, populated city center that sprang to her mind. It was with difficulty that she could recall the destroyed city center and superimpose it on the pre-war city center. This corroborates that there is a very old past that the present of ruins itself secretes, for indeed in that case it is natural that it would be more difficult to remember the destroyed city center, which is maybe as old as Baalbek, in any case older than the 1940s, than to remember the city center imbibed through the memories of the parents, hence which belongs to the 1960s, 1950s, 1940s. It was only by the third or fourth visit to that area that she really felt that the destroyed city center was the reality—what facilitated this realization was her noticing the presence of refugees in some of the destroyed buildings.

Those who are reconstructing Beirut's Central District under the banner and motto "Ancient City of the Future" are oblivious that ruins secrete and exist in a past that is artificial, one that does not belong to history, was not gradually produced by it. All discourse on authenticity implies a suspicion toward, and prepares the ground for an attack on recent ruins, accepting only ancient "ruins," archeological "ruins," many of which while not restored are probably no longer ruins, no longer labyrinthine in their temporality and space.

One can preserve a war-damaged or crumbling building, but no one has any control over whether it will remain a ruin. I am fascinated by how and why war-damaged or crumbling buildings turn from ruins, with their idiosyncratic, often labyrinthine temporality, to more or less precisely datable structures in chronological time. The work of the American architectural firm SITE, for example Best Forest Building (Richmond, Virginia, 1980), where a forest seems to invade the building; and Indeterminate Façade, where a stack of bricks cascades through an indent in the façade, never achieves this idiosyncratic temporality, thus fails to produce ruins (and specters). While some of the war-damaged buildings had become subsumed again in chronological time, many were still ruins, and thus their destruction was as irreverent as would be that of the archaeological ruins of Baalbek: because ruins exist in an anachronistic, labyrinthine temporality, they are instantly ancient. The physical destruction of severely damaged buildings to construct others in their place is sacrilegious not because they are eliminated as ruins: a ruin cannot be intentionally eliminated since even when it is reconstructed or demolished and replaced by a new building, it is actually still a ruin, that is contains a labyrinthine space and time, this becoming manifest at least in flashes. Such physical destruction is sacrilegious because of the brutal unawareness it betrays of the different space and time ruins contain. It exhibits the same brutality that was shown during the war. The demolition of many of the ruined buildings of the city center by implosions or otherwise 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. We can detect whether a certain war-damaged building is a ruin by whether it is haunted (or reported to be haunted—is there a difference?), or induces fantastic or horror fiction. Whether Lebanon would be hospitable to the undead depends on whether some of the numerous war-damaged buildings are still ruins, with an anachronistic temporality.

Judging from what happened in Beirut's war-devastated city center, even ruins, thus labyrinths, can be bought and sold! Were the system that is presently in power, the capitalist one, to maintain its hegemony far into the future, then I project that even black holes, which while not psychological—except in bad horror films and novels—are spiritual, as is indicated by their temporality that is not limited to the

chronological but is often labyrinthine, and which do not belong to the universe but border it, will be bought and sold by the universe's denizens.

Sometimes I have the apprehension that the reconstructions in Beirut's Central District are not real, that one day I may actually see them the way the protagonist of Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari* (1953) perceives the exquisite mansion as a ruin on finding out that the lover he meets there is actually a revenant; or the way, toward the end of Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), Torrance's wife witnesses the hotel her husband was brought in to maintain as a ruin;[7] or the way in Herzog's *Nosferatu, the Vampire* (1978) the shots of Harker's trip and then visit to Nosferatu's castle are intercut with shots showing the castle as already a ruin. For as long as there still are war-damaged buildings in the Central District, one of the areas most severely damaged by the fighting during the civil-war, such buildings will still evoke a counter to the enormous weight of the myriad concrete buildings that are being constructed in the rest of Beirut with no regard for urban planning. But some measure will have to be devised to counter and alleviate the effect of satiation by positivity that will happen when the whole of the damaged city is reconstructed or built anew. One such measure is to project at night, Krzysztof Wodiczko-wise, life-size images of destroyed buildings over at least some of the reconstructed ones. Another measure is to start screening on the day when the last building has been reconstructed the aforementioned three films twenty four hours a day somewhere in Beirut, for example at the war-damaged Grand Theatre—until the images have so deteriorated that one sees only grains on the TV screens in the cinema vestibule or endless scratches on the film screen. I predict that when war-damaged buildings have vanished from Beirut's scape, some people will begin complaining to psychiatrists that they are apprehending even reconstructed buildings as ruins. While the imagination of disaster for a city such as Los Angeles, which has not already been reduced to ruins, is that of its destruction, exemplarily in an earthquake,[8] for Beirut it is fundamentally that of its revelation when reconstructed as still a ruined city.

While as physical structures doomed to reconstruction or demolition or slow deterioration, ruins quickly give us the impulse, if not the urge to preserve documents of them in photographs, video, or film, they nonetheless basically instance an architecture implicated with fiction. For while I can reach certain facets of reality, explore them without passing through fiction, or psychosis with its attendant hallucinations, this revealing these subjects as documentary ones even if they are shot in fiction films; I cannot do so with ruins. There has to be a relay between documentary and fiction whenever dealing with ruins—or else a documentary on ruins has to continue with interviews with or a section on psychotics. Fiction has to reveal to us the anomalous, labyrinthine space-time of ruins; and, in case no ruins subsist for the ghost to appear, to supplement reality as a site of return of the revenant. In post-war countries, fiction is too serious a matter to be left to "imaginative" people. The ghost is often fictional, not in the sense that he is merely "1. a. An imaginative creation or a pretense that does not represent actuality but has been invented. 2. A lie" (*American Heritage Dictionary*); but in the sense that one of the main loci for his

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[7] Humor in Kubrick's film of having the same person who was brought to the hotel as a caretaker to fix any malfunctions and deterioration from lack of upkeep precipitate the sudden turning of the whole place into a ruin.

[8] See Mike Davis' *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998) for a thorough investigation of the various scenarios of an imagined destruction of Los Angeles.

appearance is fiction, whether novels, short stories, films or videos. It is too dangerous after a civil war or a war, which produce so much unfinished business, for there to be no ghosts both in reality (haunted houses) and in fiction that builds "a universe that doesn't fall apart two days later" (Philip K. Dick)—the current virtual absence of novels and films about revenants in Lebanon is one of the signs of a collective post-traumatic amnesia.[9] We are yet to witness the proliferation of a horror literature of ghosts and the undead (fiction may thus bring about a catharsis for the revenant and an exorcism for the living); or to hear many more stories about ghosts in Beirut once its Central District is inhabited, and not as now still largely unoccupied mostly because of the recession. Were neither of these eventualities to happen, then this would be a further instance of a post-traumatic amnesia, this time that of those who died prematurely and unjustly in the war.

Jalal Toufic, *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*, revised and expanded edition
(Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 2003), 67–74

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[9] The Lebanese literary critic Yumná al-'Īd tells me, based on her extensive knowledge of Lebanese literature, that there are virtually no specters in Lebanese novels and short stories. It seems that the same sweeping judgement can be applied in the smaller domain of Lebanese film and video. A notable exception is Ghassan Salhab's film *Phantom Beirut*, 1998. In this film, some years into the war and the civil war in Lebanon, a man, Khalil, disappears. His sister and his friends believe he was killed. One day one of them comes across an identical-looking man while at the airport to receive a friend flying in from abroad. He and several of Khalil's former friends shadow the man in question. When the latter ends up coming to the apartment of the missing man's sister, both she and his friends are uncertain whether it is actually Khalil or his ghost, one of them apprehensively touching him to make sure that he is actually, physically, there with them. They grow to feel that he is Khalil, and come to the conclusion that his disappearance was a scheme to make them think that he died and abscond with the money collected by their militant association. And yet at the end of the film, in a symptomatic structural mistake, strangers hired to kidnap another person kidnap him instead. The mistake of these kidnapers is mortal even if they do not end up killing him, since he is revealed by their misapprehension as affected, haunted by the other, and therefore someone come back from the dead, a revenant, a phantom. He could fool his sister and his former friends but not *objective chance*.