

DISCUSSING LIFE, DEATH AND THE HOLIDAY INN APOLOGUE WITH ADONIS.

Ely Dagher

The following is an account of the coming to existence and the construction of the "holiday inn apologue" installation alongside some deconstruction of memory, archive, and history, through an e-mail conversation with Adonis¹, son of Phoenix.

Growing up in Lebanon during the nineties, Beirut and its centre in particular were a sort of vague notion of a place, a capital that I had never laid eyes on until the age of 16; bearing in mind that I grew up some 5 km away. Following the end of the war in 1990, depending on religious and sectarian differences, people remained (im-)mobilized on either sides of the old green line² that cut through the heart of Beirut for the conflict hasn't ended until today. The central district was then privatized, shutdown, torn down and in a stage of reconstruction. The massive building that was once the Holiday Inn hotel is positioned on the outer limits of this central district and is-for the moment-one of the few remaining structures around, bearing the scars of the war. I have often referred to the Holiday Inn hotel, as a monument without really knowing the true meaning of the word, until I recently started questioning the legitimacy of my claim; when comparing it to other monuments. If it is *a monument* then why demolish or refurbish it while other monuments are highly acclaimed and protected?

Monument, the word, derives from the Latin *Monimentum*, and translates as *Reminder*; a reminder of an event or an entity facing oblivion. In a study entitled 'the modern cult of monuments', published in 1903, Alois Riegl illustrates two kinds of monuments; intentional and unintentional monuments (1982).

From: Adonis
To: Ely Dagher
Subject: hello/holiday inn

Date Tue, Feb 17, 2009
06:52 PM

Hello Ely,

It's been so long. I just wanted to tell u that I have recently found out that the Holiday inn is soon to be demolished. The owners are building a luxury apartment block, with a magnificent view they said. You are probably not so thrilled about this news; I know how fond you were of the building and concerned with this entire debacle. That is all I know for now but I will make sure to update you in case I hear of any more news.

Adonis.

¹ Adonis is an annually-renewed, vegetation god, present in both Phoenician and later Greek mythology. A life-death-rebirth deity tied to the calendar. While hunting, he was killed by a boar next to a river in Mount Lebanon. The river ran red as Aphrodite sprinkled nectar on his body.

² The Green Line was the demarcation line from 1975 to 1990. It separated the mainly Muslim factions in West Beirut from the major Christian ones in East Beirut and cut right through Beirut's central district. The name refers to the excessive amount of foliage that grew because the space was uninhabited.

Ely Dagher To: Adonis Date Fri, Feb 20, 2009
[Show details](#) 10:14 AM

Hey Adonis,

It's been a while indeed it's nice to hear from u again.

Thanks for the info; I am not that surprised to hear this though considering that not much of the ruins are left around there. Are they still going to demolish the egg?

Ely.

(...)

From: Ely Dagher Date Wed, Mar 18, 2009
To: Adonis 09:32 AM
Subject: Beirut flight w wainak?

Where have you disappeared? It's been like a month since you told me about the holiday inn and you haven't answered any of my e-mails since. Anyway let me know what ure up to. I have given this some thought; u know I have been working on this subject for a while and the holiday inn's memory is very special in that sense. The thing is... that I am thinking of doing a sort of project/installation; an intervention on the topic and I am going to use the opportunity that I have this final degree exhibition coming up as a start.

I will send you more information and updates about it as soon as I have some. Hopefully very soon as I have arranged some meetings and I am trying to get a permission to access the hotel.

I booked an early flight back to Beirut; I leave on the 30th. We should meet up.

Ely.

An intentional monument would be erected to "recall a specific moment or complex of moments from the past" and therefore hold "a claim to immortality" (Riegl, 1982, P. 24-38). On the other hand, an unintentional monument is one whose meaning is defined not by their creators, but by our modern perceptions, for example, by retrospective cultural memory (Riegl, 1982, P. 23). Riegl then added that intentional monuments could become *unintentional* when they surpass and outlive their original purpose.

I might then add that *all* monuments can be considered as unintentional ones; even if built with explicit prospective memories in mind, their meanings will eventually only be determined and negotiated within history and cultural memory of each and every present. History does not only transform intentional monuments into unintentional ones; it has the power to transform any element within its archive into one as Foucault once stated “in our time history is that which transforms documents into monuments” (1972, P. 7)

Considering the above statements, the Holiday Inn hotel is undeniably a monument, a reminder; an unintentional one with war and death covered historic and use value that has long outlived its hotel function. It is also exactly for that same reason that it is being pushed into forgetfulness. This massive structure is an unwanted, unasked for, unintentional reminder of destruction and other inhuman atrocities that occurred there and during the overall Lebanese war.

Facing the lack of recorded contemporary Lebanese history or even history text books beyond the 1950’s, elements that help us claim remembrance are not ready to disappear; yet the city of Beirut is in a state of oblivion and a monument such as the ravaged Holiday Inn does not fit within it. ‘You get this feeling they think that if history is going to create a problem, then we can just forget it ever happened’, says the former director of the education centre for research and development (Fattah, 2007).

(...)

Ely Dagher
[Show details](#)

To: Adonis

Date Tue, Apr 07, 2009
10:14 AM

Hey Adonis,

How was your hunting trip? Are you back yet? I met some people at UMAM last Friday. Don’t know if u know it? It is the association that works on documentation and research of contemporary Lebanese history. They have been creating an archive of the recent Lebanese history, but of course not much is public yet. They are actually digitalizing all their documents now and will make public whatever they can. They also mentioned that they are working on a new history schoolbook with [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. It’s sort of secret for now; their last efforts failed when people objected it for it didn’t fit within their version of the stories.

It will be good if students get to finally learn about the Lebanese history beyond the 40’s; I always found it strange you know, as a kid but never really questioned it. It was like some sort of fairytale ending, “in 1943 we got independence and lived happily ever after, the end”; what about the 6 first

years of my life spent in underground shelters and moving from one town to another, it wasn't all that peachy. Anyway, I have taken a look at some of their newspapers from the 70's onward and I am still waiting cos of some censorship and protection issues for permission to view the few interviews they have made with former militia fighters from the *hotel war*³. I am meeting this man I call Marion on Thursday for a beer in Gemayzeh, he says he has old footage of the holiday inn and that he witnessed the day the Mourabitoun took over in 1976.

ELY.

Adonis	To: me	Date	Wed, Apr 08, 2009
Show details			00:43 AM

Ely so sorry for taking so long to answer I've been let's say, busy haunting a few minds and gathering myself. Good to hear that you getting around and working. Seems it is going fine, although I have absolutely no idea about what you are doing with all of this. Why are going through UMAM's archive and gathering information? We should meet and talk it over coffee or so.

Ps: You should also ask your dad if he knows anything about it.

Adonis.

When discussing the Lebanese war's or the hotel's memory one must remember Pierre Nora's view on the subject; 'Modern memory is above all archival, it relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image' (Nora, 1998, P. 13). But what if that sense of immediacy doesn't exist when it comes to Lebanese contemporary history? How can collective memory then subsist when the only existing memory is based on individual cognitive and identification processes of different versions of stories, anecdotes and fabrications? With no collective memory, mass order is no longer assured; and with no order collective memory cannot be authorized. In light of such disorder national consciousness is disturbed while individual and communitarian memory and identity is fortified, deepening the scope of the national conflict.

³ The hotel war was a series of battles and fights that occurred in the hotel district in central Beirut, including the Holiday Inn hotel, the Phoenicia hotel, and the St Georges Hotel/marina. On the 21st of march 1976 the holiday inn which was controlled by the Christian Phalangist militia fell in the hand of the Mourabitoun (Nasserist, sunni Muslim militia) followed by the entire central district that the Mourabitoun then controlled until the cease fire/end of the war in 1990.

Ely Dagher
[Show details](#)

To: Adonis

Date Thu, Apr 09, 2009
05:07 PM

Dear Adonis,

I have actually already spoken to my dad and well he was ... uhm fighting there :S. This was completely new to me and i felt awkward about it which is why I have left it out until now. I always knew he fought during the war but never really asked and he was never keen on telling my little brother and me. Back in London I was chatting with him and telling him about this project and then he randomly mentions that he was fighting there in 1975; I will just copy and paste the conversation below.

Oh yes and before I forget, I am going to properly interview him next Sunday.

(...)

7:39 PM **imad:** i was there during the war

me: eh

imad: chou eh really

me: halla2 i will ask u all details in march

imad: ok

me: cos its difficult on the internet

bass do u know when the hotel war started and so on

imad: go take a shouwer

me: and when it ended

7:40 PM **imad:** not really but i will ask

me: ok

thnx

7:41 PM **imad:** talk later?

me: when ?

im still here

imad: 5 min

7:42 PM **me:** ure leaving ?

ok

7:46 PM **imad:** im back ok

7:47 PM helooooo

lelllooooo

me: yes

im here

imad: ahlan

7:49 PM do you want to tell you the story

7:51 PM **me:** your story?

not now i prefer u tell me in beirut

imad: ah ok

7:52 PM i will never forget that moment because it was my first battle in my life i stay there for 6 month

me: 6 month in a row ?
when was that ?
7:53 PM **imad:** 1975
7:54 PM **me:** uff
haram
7:55 PM so u were 17 ?
7:56 PM **imad:** yes
7:57 PM front the murr tour and hotel phenicia
7:58 PM and where monro hotel now it was a club for lebanese army
7:59 PM yes my parent did'nt know that i was there
8:00 PM **me:** how did you disappear for 6 months without telling
your parents?
8:01 PM **imad:** some time i go in yhe morning and come back at night but
after they now
(...)

Okay so that was that... Now about your questions on the installation and the material; I am currently building a scale model of the hotel which I hope to be building on a bigger scale later on and will hold all the documents (still working on gathering all that) Here are some pictures:



Slide.5L, *Holiday Inn Apologue*, 2009. Ely Dagher.



Cardboard scale model of the Holiday Inn, Beirut, 2009. Own photographs.

The windows of the hotel will form drawers that you can open, sort of like a big filing cabinet containing the archive authorizing the hotel's history and memory. The approach I am following and reason why I am doing all of this is because it fits in the things i have been working and thinking about for some time now. I haven't sent you my previous essay yet but this fits in the context.

"Archiving identity" was the title, and I was arguing how today the notion of identity has to be approached differently with its archive and its coming into being in mind. As in, collective identity for example draws its power from the construction of history and its archive, and is not an absolute truth as some claim. And I quote, 'The archive and the impression that it is, is not only a reconstruction of the deconstructed memory. Through its technical structure it is also a determining factor of the *archivabile* content in its coming into existence and its relationship to the future. I would like to emphasize on the term reconstruction here for it contains a reference to the interpretation formed by piecing together chosen bits of the deconstructed body under certain rules of categorization, thus creating a new entity that is now independent from the memory and history; one that replaces them '(Dagher,2008). Derrida wrote that archivization produces as much as it records an event. The memory of the holiday inn which is assembled from the non existing/hazy Lebanese contemporary archive is then problematic.

Even though the archive that I will be creating would hold factual documents and elements, it could only bare and claim truth of my own fabrications. The documents presented in the archive, the *archivable* content, could be both factual and fictitious, putting in question all that draws power and existence from such an archive; history, memory or even identity.

the archive to regain access to what has been lost of his childhood. But Boltanski is extremely aware of the deceptive power of the archive, for through his work he also questions the possibility of such resurrection; the resurrection of true memory.

True memory has 'taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body's inherent self knowledge' whereas modern memory which is transformed by the course of history is 'voluntary and deliberate; no longer spontaneous... psychological, individual, subjective; but never social, collective or all encompassing '(Nora, 1989, P. 13). History has reshaped memory.

Pierre Nora's *sites of memory* occur when modern memory is reconstructed beneath the eyes of that critical history; and it is only through our intention to remember that they are guaranteed existence. Our modern impulse turns space into place when archiving what we find as history and then into space again within history's cultural activity which turns the archive into a fundamental site of remembrance; a site of memory.

This archive is then a place for memory's new space; one of individual cognitive process throughout history. This shift from space/life to place/death and space/resurrection again is not without loss; a loss that occurs at the moment of consignment, the place/ death momentum. The archive does not conquer the loss of memory nor of Boltanski's identity; it merely produces a substitute. Such a shift from memory to history requires social groups to redefine themselves through the regeneration of their own history for true memory once lost can never be resurrected; memory is only regenerated.

From: Ely Dagher
To: Adonis
Subject: Comploting against an old man!

Date Fri, May 01, 2009
10:22 AM

Hello Adonis,

I can't believe I have already been here for so long and still haven't been able to collect enough material for a substantial archival body. It is very difficult to gather information and the frustration is growing. I managed to take some sneak peeks at interviews and spoke to someone from Ain el Mraysse with a surprisingly vivid memory but there is very little information about the hotel that they remember. It is always present in the backdrop but is rarely the protagonist, except in [REDACTED]'s story (the man who's contact you gave me).

I drove for forty minutes to get to his house, at the end of the village down the Bkosta valley. The entrance was overgrown with weed and purple flowers, there was a small white coloured water stream cutting through the path; you'd be surprised to find out someone still lives there. It was his grandfather's house he said. He moved there 8 years ago and hasn't left since. He spends his days gardening. The garden was impeccable. I wasn't allowed to film nor record anything as he told me much about his tomato plants and the fig jam he was getting ready to cook. "My son visits every now and then, he picks up some jam and fruits for my grandchildren", he said. It was a very difficult meeting.

The 70 year old man spent 11 years in a mental hospital (in Deir el Salib). He was not very happy to talk about the war days. I must admit I felt uncomfortable trying to bring up memories that he struggles with. A short time in the conversation about when he was stationed in the holiday inn, and he accused me of trickery and plotting to get him. "Get you!" I asked. He shouted and kicked me out before I had the chance to ask what I would want to get him for. I wonder if it really matters anyway.

Ely Dagher
[Show details](#)

To: Adonis

Date Fri, May 01, 2009
10:28 AM

Oops..!! I forgot some things; I clicked send too early, maybe the most important things?☺. I have got some new information; apparently, they only played one film at the hotel's theatre, "the great Waltz". I always thought the hotel had a longer life before the war but it only opened in 1974 and then the war broke out less than 12 months later. And then soon (...)

I'm sorry for the previous long e-mail and this one as well but I figured you would want to know how it all happened. Let me know what you think, or give me some advice cos I am starting to get lost in the middle of all these things. I have been visiting the holiday inn as well as other buildings in ruins lately and documenting. I'll send you some pictures in attachment below. I will hopefully be interviewing my dad this Sunday at my parent's house; will let you know how that goes if he doesn't postpone a 3rd time.

ELY.



Consecutively Slide.13L⁴, 3R, 11R, *Holiday Inn Apologue*, 2009. Ely Dagher.

⁴ The installation consisted of two side by side slide projectors. L refers to the left one while R to the right projector.



Slide.31R, *Holiday Inn Apologue*, 2009. Ely Dagher.

Adonis
[Show details](#)

To:me

Date Sat, May 02, 2009
07:36 PM

Hey Ely,

The hotel opened in 1973 not 1974, and there was no movie theatre there. Where did you get the information from? Probably from that crazy man with the jam. There was no theatre, i looked it up and asked around to make sure of my information. Did you get in touch with any of the fighters who jumped off the rooftop?

Although I feel pressured to write you an e-mail as long as yours, I will spare you today. You probably don't have time to waste online, and I am quite absent myself. Absurdity should be the title of my life these days; I am being constantly recycled and I think the boar is catching up on me. I would like to have a coffee with you soon before the end of my round so we can discuss all this, maybe tomorrow after your dad's interview. Let me know.

Adonis.

Ely Dgaher
[Show details](#)

To: Adonis

Date Sat, May 02, 2009
07:41 PM

Hey Adonis,

I am glad you are online now because I need to correct you. There WAS a theatre in the basement of the building and I managed to find posters of the film showing there as well as images of the theatre space. Anyway my

project's focus has shifted a little bit; for now I am now focusing on a narrative based installation as an element of the archival content that we talked about; instead of working on the entire archival body. Based on what I have been gathering from documents, interviews, pictures and other elements, the installation will recall an episode of events in the holiday inn's past. A sort of Fable or apologue told through projected slides/photographs and audio voiceovers; a recorded piece for history, for the hotel's future memory.

Tommorow afternoon is a great idea let's meet around 5 at the Cafe Najjar next to my parent's house. I would appreciate it if you wouldn't mention anything again about my information regarding the Holiday inn being wrong. I have my evidence to back me up. And In any case it is my story to tell.

ELY.

When creating an archive, a place for history and sites of memory, one must be aware of how this past and present archive will be accessed and approached in the future that it determines. When looking at the Greek myths' and Borges' archive, their scandalous aspects aroused suspicion and interpretation in which one might get lost. Does their archive start and end with the stories or with their interpretation. 'Where does the outside commence' Derrida would ask. In Borges' case, or at least according to him and his biographers, the experience is an essential aspect of his work; one can read his stories without their message/interpretation but the experience wouldn't be as complete as Borges might have intended it to be; Borges believes not in words but in the effect they produce. In any case when talking about such a knotty hazy construct such as the archive absolute truth and completeness is never at hand. Depending on what we choose to remember him and read his history with, Borges' work and experience could differ from criticised derogatory stories to acclaimed optimistic revelations.

Reading Borges: 'From an ideological point of view, Borges' conception of history and reality amounts to a frozen and futureless destiny' (De Garayalde, 1978, p. 8). In his stories such as in *the library of Babel* (1964) Borges rejects history when he postulates the cyclic repetition of time, making the creation of new possibilities; impossible .He constantly and objectively denies the possibility of understanding reality⁵, thus at first thought, eliminating the possibility of changing that reality. He denies both history and rationality.

Experiencing Borges: By denying the possibility of objectively understanding reality, Borges' desire is not to condemn us, but to rather open our minds to new possibilities of understanding it beyond our knowledge

⁵ More on this see Borges 1971, *Discusión* and *The aleph*.

and rationality; through his fictitious narratives. As an outcome of Borges' Sufi⁶ influence he believes that our perceptions are conditioned and limited and that reality cannot be explained through reason. Even more our perceptions are conditioned and limited to our own constructed limitations such as archives and history for example. For Borges 'the very act of perceiving and paying attention is selective. We leave out what we are not interested in. What we see and what we hear is a result of our recollections, our fears and our cautiousness. As regards to the body, unconsciousness is a necessity for physical action; our life is a series of adaptations, in other words an education in oblivion' (Discusión, 1971, P. 69-70).

So where does that leave us, confronted with the results of our own performances, the actions and creations of our selective consciousness? When faced with such theories of new realms and dimensions, reality becomes overwhelmed with uncertainties and doubts. Verbs like postulate, suggest, guess and assume would make their way in my vocabulary and replace other affirmative ones. When writing, I might then add more maybes and perhapses.

In a similar direction as Borges', in my work, fiction, artifice and narrative become great tools for transcending reason, inducing doubts and shaking the foundations of my subjects. In that respect a historical writing or auditory narrative merged with the omnipotence of imagery and cinema in contemporary memory/culture⁷ will try to defy and question forgetfulness as much as subjectivism.

In *Discusión* Borges adds that it is absurd to reduce a story to its moral, a parable merely to its purpose, a *form to its content* (1971, P. 164).

From: Ely Dagher
To: Adonis
Subject: Some extracts of material from the installation.

Date Thu, May 07 2009
11:39 PM

Hello Adonis,
It was nice having coffee with you the other day. I have very good news. I might have found some old slides of photographs that I might have taken

⁶ 'The Sufis maintain that man like all living beings is included in a continual and evolutionary process within the universe. It is man's duty to participate to its advancement...man interprets things according to limited patterns that are not objective and consequently he has little capacity for judging things correctly' (De Garayalde, 1978, P14). For more on Sufism and Borges see De Garayalde, 1978.

⁷Modern memory is affected by a historical archive as much as it is by cinematic experiences. Today just as Hollywood utilizes news and documentary or even phone video codes, news reports and documentaries utilize Hollywood code to stage their events and news. Sources of mediation accelerate and evolve i.e. from film to video to TV, 3D and then the internet. This evolution does not eliminate one or the other; they could coexist, build upon each other and use their subsequent codes.

inside and around the hotel during the war. i just finished transcribing the interviews and started writing the narration (for the V.O) following a fighter's journey in the hotel until reaching the rooftop right before the fall. Here's a small extract followed with scans of few of the slides i found:

"There is nothing worse than a sharp image of a blurry memory (...) someone had to do it; he had to do it.

Sandbags, rubble and a foul odour decorate the place, and the air has a peculiar taste of fire and smoke. Only later did he discover that he is inside the holiday inn hotel.

He is told the cinema theatre is two floors below. He gets lost. It was dark, and he had left his flashlight one floor up.

He warmed his hands in his pockets (...)

... he is in a garden; he remembers there were gardens where people lay on the grass. He remembers a still face, a fallen body.

Isn't it only through scars that memories demand recollection?

With his gun he keeps moving up floors. From room to room, through walls and windows, from which he would gaze at the sea, thinking of the movies, he used to watch. He would never find the cinema.

At one point: they were tricked. A lamp and chair were left there for snipers to shoot at them once they were there. They knew they were there.

He was never able to sleep. He constantly sees images of his mother's face as she danced in a ballroom. She believed he had been to school that Friday morning. He then wonders why he has not been told she was a dancer in the 1930's. I couldn't tell him that she wasn't. "



Photograph of slides from the *holiday inn apologue*. Own photograph



Consecutively slide.27L, 15R, 16R, 21L, 31L, 14R. *Holiday Inn Apologue*, 2009. Ely Dagher.



Slide.8L. *Holiday Inn Apologue*, 2009. Ely Dagher.

The full text will probably be recorded by two different voices. I guess they might take turns and sometimes overlap as they will tell the story while the images would be projected using two parallel slide projectors.

Ely.

A lot of questions have been raised in this essay that might seem unanswered. Theories regarding the archive, history, memory and identity as well as narratives and stories have all been put in question as objects of our own creations that fit within our own limitations and rules. In a contemporary society that depends on immediacy and reason, one can easily be trapped within meticulously fabricated truths and matters; unless faced with obvious artifice. When approached by elements of memory, history or identity, it would be crucial to keep in mind the intricate correlation between them particularly through the use of the archive, and look for answers beyond their rationality.

In the essay *Discusión* Borges believes that 'the frantic desire to reach a conclusion is the most disastrous and sterile of manias' (1971, P. 141).

Adonis
[Show details](#)

To: me

Date Sun, May 10 2009
02:23 AM

Ely,

Ever since our meeting I have been wondering how your dad turned out fine after having spent his teenage years ditching school for a machine gun,

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