Ghassan Halwani and the reclaiming of Lebanon's imaginaries

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Abstract

This article explores how the collective memory pertaining to the war's kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances, has thus far been addressed in Lebanon through Ghassan Halwani's 2018 film "Erased,___Ascent of the Invisible".

With Lebanon's Revolution closing in on its second month, the Lebanese scholar Jamil Mouawad listed "discursive hegemony and control over the imaginaries" as one of the three pillars of the sectarian regime1 being challenged by protesters.

The latter begs the following inquiry: How is the October 17 Revolution catalysing the reclaiming of imaginaries? In order to answer this question, it is important to understand how the collective memory pertaining to the war's kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances, has thus far been addressed in Lebanon. The following piece explores this topic through Ghassan Halwani's 2018 film "*Erased,___Ascent of the Invisible*".

"He elevates them to the symbolic rank of martyrdom, only to sink them to the bottom of their disappearance." - Ghassan Halwani

When a photojournalist was presented with a photograph that he had taken of a kidnapping during the Lebanese civil war, he expressed to Ghassan Halwani the following: "I cannot confront this on my own. It requires the collective". We, the audience, see this scene unfold in *Erased,___Ascent of the Invisible* (2018)2, a critically acclaimed film by Halwani which touches upon the ever-persisting topic of those kidnapped during the war, and the victims of enforced disappearances. Similar to the photojournalist, and as portrayed in *Erased,___Ascent of the Invisible*, we [the audience] are also witnesses to the grave violations of human rights which have occurred during the war, and are not mere innocent

bystanders who just happen to share territory with those who have committed these crimes.

To witness the crime of disappearance is an inherently political act, one which is often set aside in 'postwar' discourses on the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances. We are meant to believe that this issue is strictly humanitarian, and should only appeal to our common humanity. Surely there is some truth to this, yet we tend to forget that the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances have stories. They are individuals with agency beyond their categorisation as 'the disappeared'. The multiple incidents of enforced disappearances should not just be regarded as occurrences among many that took place during the civil war, incidentally referred to as 'the events' *(Al Ahdath)*. Just as with 'the events', the depoliticised category of 'the disappeared'often serves to blur the distinction between a series of crimes that must be accounted for, and the need to move on from the war's trauma. Rather than hold perpetrators accountable, it defacto places the burden on the families of the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances to 'explain themselves', to justify why they "just don't declare them dead and move on"[3].

From the onset of *Erased,___Ascent of the Invisible,* Halwani denies us the opportunity to turn the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances into a strictly humanitarian cause. In that aforementioned scene, we do not see what they are seeing because Halwani doctored the photo to erase the men kidnapping, and the man being kidnapped. Instead, the scene is described to us by Halwani and the photojournalist. Due to the fact that these perpetrators are still alive and the photojournalist knows who they are, we were not able to see their faces. As the Lebanese government, under the 'tutelage' of the Syrian regime at the time, passed an Amnesty Law exonerating all "political and wartime crimes committed before the 28th of March 1991", no real accountability has been possible. The kidnapping, although a punishable crime, is thus transformed into a discursive impossibility, a taboo which cannot be examined in great detail. This is the process through which 'the disappeared' are turned into an invisible class, yet existent. Rather, it is the association between existence and visibility that we are asked to deconstruct. Just because we are not able to see them, does not mean that they are not there. Beirut, after all, is filled with mass graves, some estimates numbering them at over 100[4].

Halwani's intention was not to repeat "the discourse of the families", as he considers that the families of the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances have their own discourse, drawn from their personal traumatic experiences. He believes that it is their discourse, and theirs alone, and that it should not be reproduced by the rest of us, as it risks painting political crimes affecting thousands in manifestly apolitical terms, thus incurring the risk of exempting criminals of their acts. Of course, there is no generalised attitude to approach such a topic, and there are differences in how the families have chosen to approach it. This was behind his motivation to make this film. He wanted the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances to speak to 'us' directly rather than through the mediation of their families. By speaking to us directly, they regain their agency and, subsequently, 'ascend'. By speaking

to us directly, they are conveying the message that they are just like us, and what happened to them, could have happened to us.

In a scene marking perhaps the most moving segment of *Erased,___Ascent of the Invisible,* Halwani is seen removing posters from a wall in Beirut, revealing photos of the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances, beneath them. He removed those posters in 2013, and chose to make them public knowledge anonymously to avoid being swept up in humanitarian discourse. "Of course he would do that. His father [Adnan Halwani] was kidnapped and his mom [Wadad Halwani] leads the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon", he told me. This is how the narrative would usually go, and this is what he wanted to challenge. "I chose not to present myself as myself", he adds. At one point, after carefully removing the posters, which had erased and rendered the kidnapped and the victims of enforced disappearances invisible, thereby allowing them to 'ascend', Halwani slowly writes down the names, dates of birth, and dates of kidnapping next to each photo. Through this process, he gave them agency long denied at the national and, often, community level.

Since his father, a public school teacher, and a member of the Communist Action Organisation in Lebanon, was kidnapped in 1982, Halwani witnessed the moment when people officially became 'the disappeared', and turned into an idea that was often devoid of the accounts which would allow these victims to be individuals in the first place. The absurdity of a man who was only a child during 'the events' being the one to unveil these stories is not lost on the viewers, particularly those of the postwar generation, such as myself. Like Halwani, those who grew up with stories of the war, or the lack thereof, also 'inherited' a discourse that didn't belong to them. That generation was left in the uneasy situation of having to understand events, which they never witnessed, in a 'postwar' setting that ultimately discourages substantial conversations about the war. Furthermore, the aforementioned discursive impossibility imposed on the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances ends up becoming 'our' problem to solve.

What is left behind when that war generation passes away? "What will stay for society is perhaps only the discourse of these families as a legacy. I am not making a discourse here. I am extracting the case of the missing persons from these families and trying to put these kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances in the context of a national problem." As these need to be done – and not just said – Halwani tried to provide in this film "a connection between the viewer and the 'disappeared' as a person". This, again, is a way of bypassing the mediation of their families, not to diminish the latter's importance, but simply to allow for a direct connection to be made between the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances, and the majority of the population in Lebanon who do not think about them on a daily basis.

Halawni touched upon a topic that is difficult to address, again for the simple reason of no space being provided at the national level for these difficult conversations to occur. When I went to speak with families whose children were kidnapped on behalf of an NGO a few years ago, I was asked to present their case, at the time, as a blogger, in a way that would appeal to a wider audience, in an attempt to 'raise awareness'. I was immediately faced with an impossibility, for what awareness can be raised about a subject that is in and of itself actively rendered invisible? For these people to become visible, individuals such as myself need to "make a personal attempt at connecting with this cause", to quote Halwani. I had not done so at the time, as I was raised in an environment where the personal was actively separated from the political. 'The events', whether those of the past, or those of the endlessly extended 'now', from which all those living in postwar Lebanon – and it is important here to note that Halwani speaks about all of Lebanon's residents, not just Lebanese citizens – are unable to escape, could not be addressed. We were rendered powerless before even understanding the power dynamics which rendered us as such.

The pace of discovery and revelation in *Erased,___Ascent of the Invisible* is slow. We progressively form a cognitive map of the stories of kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances. This allows us to filter out preconceptions that many of us may have had before starting to watch the film. This is what, in my opinion, truly makes this film stand out. There have been many movies produced since 1990 on the topic of the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances such as *Here Comes The Rain* (Bahij Hojeij, 2010), *A Perfect Day* (Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 2005) and *Phantom Beirut* (Ghassan Salhab, 1998). There have also been a few documentaries such as *Sleepless Nights* (Eliane Raheb, 2012). In many ways, these can be considered as attempts to rectify a national error, made by our political class often, it seems, with our complicity. It reflects Lebanese cinema's general tendency to be mirrors of a society, without necessarily proposing healing processes. As Lina Khatib wrote in her seminal 2008 book on Lebanese cinema[5], in the postwar era the medium took on the role of a "commentator on the development of sectarian conflict in Lebanon; on the normalization of war; on the reconstruction of Lebanon in the post-war period; and on the way the war still lurks in every corner in today's Lebanon." *Erased,___Ascent of the Invisible* does, perhaps, propose a roadmap moving forward: identify and name the kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances, learn their stories, find out what happened to them, and make amends with their families. This, to quote the photojournalist again, "requires the collective".

In other words, *Erased,___Ascent of the Invisible* makes the case for the act of witnessing. Since writing the above piece, Lebanon's October 17th revolution erupted. Among other achievements, it has allowed a resurfacing of previously suppressed imaginaries. Never before has it been this possible to imagine an alternative way of dealing with our collective past as a national problem, to put it in Halwani's words. The postwar era has, up until now, made way for a number of groups and individuals seemingly fighting against impossible odds. Has the October 17th revolution shifted these dynamics? Are we now able to 'deal with the past'? The upcoming essay will attempt to deal with these questions.

- [1.](#) Jamil Mouawad. Twitter Post. November 6, 2019, 12:28 a.m. https://twitter.com/JamilMouawad/status/1191995734960287744?s=19
- [2.](#) The movie is an exploration of, and a lament for, Lebanon's kidnapped and victims of enforced disappearances during the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War, as well as the suppressed memories in the postwar era. It was not released in theaters in Lebanon, but has been screened at Ayyam Beirut Cinamai'ya, the "Almost There" festival hosted by the Heinrich Boell Foundation's Middle East Office in Lebanon, and lately during the Berlinale Talents-Lebanon.
- [3.](#) A statement heard from interlocutors during previous fieldwork I had conducted.
- [4.](#) The Economist. "NGOs in Lebanon Want to Dig up Mass Graves from the Civil War". *The Economist,* July 5, 2018. Accessed December 19, 2019. https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/07/05/ngos-in-leba... ; Varzi, Changiz. "A Legacy of War in Beirut's Unknown Mass Graves". *Al Jazeera,* December 31, 2016. Accessed on December 19, 2019. https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/11/legacy-war-lebanon-un... .
- [5.](#) Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008.