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**›Missing Lebanese Wars‹. The Art Project The Atlas Group Archive and Its Endless Search for Means to ›Document‹ Traumatic Memories and Mental Realities«**

**Literaturnachweis**

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## 'Missing Lebanese Wars.' The Art Project *The Atlas Group Archive* and Its Endless Search for Means to 'Document' Traumatic Memories and Mental Realities

In April 2007 the German newspaper *taz* wrote in the context of Andreas Veiel's *Der Kick* about a "new [...] documentary theatre," about "experts of reality" or "stages for reality" (Sorrento 2007). One could ask: Is authenticity (without quotation marks) in the sense of historical truth – currently coming back on stage? It seems at least that fact-based drama or theatre of fact is critically acclaimed for unearthing concomitant aspects of certain events that stay unmentioned in the mainstream media.<sup>1</sup> Taking into consideration the growing significance of photographic documents and of journalistic investigation in contemporary art in general, one could indeed have the impression that we currently observe a kind of 'documentary turn'.

Against this background of theatre as a stage for well researched counter-information, which, to a certain extent, is rooted in the tradition of the documentary theatre of Peter Weiss or Rolf Hochhuth, the New York-based Lebanese artist Walid Raad<sup>2</sup> takes a different approach to working through history. His art project is called *The Atlas Group Archive*. It is a *kind of* research project about the Lebanese wars. This essay deals with its complex and intriguing use of historical documents. The aim is to take into consideration that 'history' is always embedded in a contradictory context of by-gone events, personal memories and official historiographies, i.e. in the context of the aftermaths of the Lebanese wars: While (re)writing and recollecting history can offer a cause and effect perspective, it can also – in defiance of the former principle – serve the purpose of addressing the issue of collective war traumata. In both of these cases tracing back history is intrinsically tied not only to, among other things, collecting testimonies of private war experiences but also to their belated interpretation.

Firstly, I provide some background information about the *Atlas Group Project* and its context. In this section I also touch upon the history of the concepts of 'document' and 'documenting'. Secondly, I take a look at some 'documents' of the *Atlas Group Archive*. And finally, I draw some conclusions about the social and historical implications of Raad's 'documents' or rather of their fragmentary incompleteness and their lack of conclusiveness.

1 *Der Kick*, for example, is about the torturing and the murder of a 16 year old boy in the small village of Potzlow in Eastern Germany in 2002. It is based on interviews with the perpetrators, their relatives and friends.

2 His name is sometimes spelled with an apostrophe (Ra'ad) and sometimes without (Raad). To simplify matters here the latter form will be used in this article.

## 1 Beyond Relativism and Positivism – Documenting the *Atlas Group Archive*

The art project *The Atlas Group Archive* consists of purportedly countless audio, visual, literary and other artefacts, marked by high archive inventory numbers. Although the so-called Fakhouri file, for example, comprises only two notebooks among two films and 15 photographs, they are nevertheless labelled as 'notebook volume 38' and 'notebook volume 72'. All the Atlas Group's documents, stories and individuals are based upon research in archives in Lebanon and elsewhere. On the one hand, Raad places found historical materials in a narrative context: For instance, he presents notebooks with commented photographs which have been ostensibly donated to the 'Atlas Group' by eyewitnesses. On the other hand, he invents or produces visual artefacts, locating them within the scope of well-known historical events, e.g. photographs taken after the war are recontextualized and backdated. One of the aims that Raad has pursued with this project is "to shed light on the contemporary history of Lebanon" (Raad 2002a, 2). He shows his works in exhibitions or in multi-media presentations/performances (e.g. *The Loudest Muttering Is Over. Documents from the Atlas Group Archive*, Kampnagel Theatre, Hamburg, March 30, 2003) that look and sound like an artist talk or an academic presentation that incorporates a follow-up audience discussion with scripted questions. In comparison with the display of the documents in the museum, his lecture performances are more complex and intriguing since the performative framing highlights the involved documents' puzzling status.

During the recent years Raad has constantly changed his aesthetic strategy of addressing the audience in his performances/lectures. In the first lecture that I attended he tried to keep a straight face even during the audience discussion; in the second one – at the Laokoon festival in Hamburg 2003 – he explicitly disclosed the document's fictitious nature.<sup>3</sup> In an interview which focused on this shift Raad admits that he sought to avoid the effect that "giggling insiders believed that they had a pact with the author against everyone who wasn't in on the charade" (Raad, quoted in: Menick 2002, n. pag.). Although Raad currently announces right from the start of his performances that the documents are produced and attributed to imaginary individuals, the audience tends to forget this. It seems that – as far as our perception is concerned – the documentary guise in which the material is presented prevails over a few short disclosing announcements. This makes evident how certain modes of supposedly authoritative and authentic addresses (the lecture, the conference) powerfully affect our understanding. Consequently, the question arises as to how one should regard the status of the exhibited or shown documents or, as Raad puts it, "under what notion of facts can we operate in our construction of 'the history of the history of Lebanon? How do we approach the fact of the war?" (Raad, quoted in: Kaplan 2004, 136)

I argue that Raad's work explicitly deals with the composition of so-called authentic documents by taking into account their framing and medialization. His work not only

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3 André Lepecki also mentions that in other lectures Raad introduces *The Atlas Group Archive* sometimes as "imaginary" and sometimes as "fictional". But sometimes he even omits these terms (cf. Lepecki 2006, 90).

rejects the ideal of artistic originality<sup>4</sup> and veracity, but, at the same time, also appropriates *and* interrogates certain forms of aesthetization that serve to illustrate or document historical reality in general, and the history of the Lebanese wars in particular. This includes modes of academic presentations that Raad chooses "to lean on and play with at the same time" (Raad, quoted in: Gilbert 2002, 40).

Thus his work reveals the profound effect that signification and presentation processes have in creating historical meaning. However, if it can be assumed that the resulting historiographies are semiotic and narrative constructions, it would not necessarily mean that they do not have any merits, validity or impact on our understanding of historical truths. In other words, Raad neither dismisses historical narratives as mere constructions nor does he naively rely on what one would call an historical positivism, i.e., a direct access to historical facts free from any interpretations. He much rather takes into account both levels of coming to terms with the past by dealing with the history of events itself *as well as* with the ways of their retrospective reinterpretation. The archive's imaginary status therefore does not devalue the status of the documents as mere fiction. In contrast, the fictional narratives and the fictionality both of the documents and of the individuals are, as Sarah Rogers points out, "the means employed by Ra'ad to offer up a possibility for imagining what is conceived of as impossible to imagine: the traumatic memories of the war" (Rogers 2002, 72). Since fiction – provided that the persons and events it portrays are fictitious but realistic – can offer means to analyze a certain social or historical situation and is able to show alternative ways of looking at a problem (without the necessity to resolve it right away), it can also help people to orient themselves even in the non-fictional reality.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the work of the 'Atlas Group' sets out, in an ambiguous fashion, the way in which the various forms of the indispensable (re)constructedness of historical facts provide information about the processes involved in working through the traumatic experiences of the Lebanese wars. One question Raad raises is: "How do we approach facts not in their crude facticity but through the complicated mediations by which they acquire their immediacy?" (Raad, quoted in: Gilbert 2002, 40).

To place emphasis on this mediated immediacy and belatedness, Raad never confronts the audience with the usual images or stories of the war. He is neither displaying blood-spattered victims nor any combat operations. Instead, he concentrates on the mental battleground of the people who suffered from the war – a battleground where the war is still ravaging. Therefore he shows traces, signs and effects of acts of war like apartment buildings under reconstruction, eyewitnesses speaking of their painful

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4 By linking the project to the idea that the 'Atlas Group' is collectively producing and accumulating the artefacts that are additionally attributed to various imaginary individuals, Raad explicitly rejects an individual authorship of the works. This has far-reaching consequences for the status of Raads documents as works of art because they thereby lose one traditional quality of art: originality. One could argue that, in most of the interviews, Raad uses the first person plural: "We, the Atlas Group Project" for the same reason.

5 See for an intriguing critical examination of the impacts of fiction on the so-called 'real world': Esposito 2007.

recollections, private notebooks or 8mm amateur films about personal experiences.<sup>6</sup> That is to say: The *Atlas Group Archive* is not so much focused on the causes but on the "hysterical symptoms"<sup>7</sup> of the Lebanese civil wars, symptoms which are – as in every war – an outcome of mental traumata that has neither been abreacted, nor completely cleared. Raad explains: "[T]he events depicted are not attached to memories of actual events but to fantasies (mine and others') erected on the basis of memories" (Raad, quoted in: Kaplan 2004, 137). As Freud has shown in his theories about trauma and hysteria, often there exists only a symbolic interconnection between the causes (e.g. the mental trauma) and the hysterical symptoms (cf. Freud 2000a, 19). Freud sees the latter as 'mnemic symbols' (*Erinnerungssymbole*) or as mediated expressions of a pathogenic trauma or conflict (cf. Freud 2000c, 192). While those contingent, 'in-significant' and 'minor' facets of events are normally suppressed in historiography to establish a coherent text and a consistent argumentation, Raad challenges the criteria of what usually constitutes an historical event by focusing on the seemingly marginal and traumatic aspects of history – those which cannot be represented directly, but which are important for those who experienced them. Hence contemporary Lebanese (post-war) history is shown not to be a kind of subject that can be dealt with by offering one master narrative with a comprehensible logic. Instead, it is presented as a kaleidoscope of heterogeneous incidents and experiences that cannot be reduced to one single principle of cause and effect.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it is impossible to reconstruct a comprehensive history of the Lebanese civil war from the body of the archive's documents. As Raad puts it: "A historian who has written the conventional, chronological, geopolitical, biographical history [...]. And then say that historian has seen the limits and ends up with stuff that he doesn't know what to do with, but that the *Atlas Group* received" (Raad, quoted in: Smith 2003, 129).

This 'stuff' that Raad mentions brings me to the question: 'what is this stuff?' or rather 'what is a document?' In other words, 'what makes something become a document?' The definition of 'documents' has far-reaching consequences for the storage of records, because it is linked to the question of what is worth remembering or what is worth to be kept for the future as a document. To clarify the concept, I refer to some definitions in the field of "information science".

In 1937 the "Institut international de coopération intellectuelle", an agency of the League of Nations, developed technical definitions of 'document' in English, French and German versions and adopted: a document "is any source of information, in material form, capable of being used for reference or study or as an authority. Examples:

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- 6 In this context it is important to note that Raad never presents his 'forged' documents in their assumed original materiality, but exhibits or shows them as reproductions, e.g. as colour digital prints, as part of DVDs or PowerPoint presentations. Due to their status as copies, it is difficult to attribute to them another of the traditional qualities of art: uniqueness.
  - 7 This is the term Raad uses to describe his documents (cf. Raad, Walid: *The Loudest Muttering Is Over: Documents from the Atlas Group Archive*. Lecture/performance presented at Kampnagel Theatre, Hamburg, March 30, 2003).
  - 8 Accordingly, Raad makes a point of addressing the 'wars [in plural] in Lebanon' instead of the 'Lebanese civil war' (cf. Gilbert 2002, 40). It might be said that irrevocable reasons for nearly two decades of internecine combat may never become clear.

manuscripts, printed matter, illustrations, diagrams, museum specimens etc." (Anonymous 1937, 234). In this definition the meaning of the Latin word *documentum* was updated. *Documentum* stood for an entity through which one can learn something, from which one can conclude something. It is related to the word *docere* – 'to teach', 'to tutor', 'to inform', 'to demonstrate'. Document in the sense of a piece of evidence ranks second in Latin (cf. Kluge 2002, 208).

The librarian and documentalist Suzanne Briet, known under the nickname "Madame Documentation", offers a slightly different perspective on the meaning of the word 'document'. In her manifest, titled *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* and published in 1951, she defines a document as "any physical or symbolic sign, preserved or recorded, intended to represent, to reconstruct, or to demonstrate a physical or conceptual phenomenon" (Briet 1951, 7, transl. in: Buckland 1997, 806). It is worth noting that in this definition a document is not a document due to its materiality, but due to its functionality, in the sense that it is used to represent or to prove something. This differentiation becomes clear when one reads Briet's short list of possible documents: "Is a star in the sky a document? Is a stone in a river a document? Is an animal in wild a document? No. But photographs or catalogues of stars, a stone in a mineralogical museum, and animals exhibited in the zoo are documents" (*ibid.*, my translation). In other words, a photo of a star turns into a document when it serves as evidence for something and for those who look at it. A wild animal is made into a document if it is exhibited as a possibly newly discovered species in the zoological garden. That is to say, a document is not based on the character of the thing itself. Instead, something is made into a document or seen as such if it is placed in an organized meaningful relation with other evidence, for example, by scientific classification or archival practice. In this case, the verb "to document" proves his processual character, because it does not stand for passively collecting representations of an 'extra-medial' reality, but for the active operation of attributing significance and conclusiveness. To put it another way: A document proves nothing, but one proves something with a document or by declaring something to be a document.

Which implications do these conclusions have on the 'documents' of the 'Atlas Group'? I would like to argue that Raad emphasizes this practical dimension of 'documentation' by showing that a document is recognized as a document and as important and relevant because of multifaceted attributions of significance. The 'stuff' Raad talked about is made into documents by its institutionalization, by claiming that it is part of the *Atlas Group Archive*, because in this way it is elevated to being historically relevant. While "information science" seeks to define the qualities of a document to meet the documentalists' need for criteria to determine whether something is pertinent or not and whether something should be archived or not, Raad acts the other way round, as he turns his 'stuff' into significant documents by storing it in his fictitious historical archive.

## 2 'Documenting' the Lebanese Wars

As noted above, it is Raad's primary interest to investigate how the history of 'the history of the Lebanese wars' is imag(in)ed and written. One of his aesthetic strategies is

to reveal the tensions between fictionality and reality or rather between fiction and historiography. As a consequence, he calls his works 'factual fictions': "As such, The Atlas Group Project, its real and imaginary documents, characters, and stories operate between the false binary of fiction and non-fiction" (Raad 2002a, 2). But which (hi)stories are told?

## 2.1 *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*

*Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* has a total duration of 17 minutes and starts with a lead-in text informing the audience about the 'source' of the 'document', the circumstances under which it was produced and under which it is intended to be shown:

In 1999, Souheil Bachar collaborated with the Atlas Group and produced 53 videotapes about his ten-year captivity in Lebanon. Tapes #17 and #31 are the only two tapes Bachar makes available for screening outside of Lebanon. In tapes #17 and #31 Bachar focuses on his three-month captivity with 5 American men in 1985.<sup>9</sup>

The video is primarily concerned with the cultural differences and the sexual relations between Souheil Bachar and the American hostages during the events of 1985 in Lebanon, which is also known as the 'Western hostage crisis'. In addition to the five well-known American hostages, Bachar is introduced as a sixth person, a "low-level employee at the Kuwait Embassy in Beirut" purportedly originating from South Lebanon. As Raad explains in an interview, during the course of his research, he ascertained that all American hostages mention such a man in the books they actually wrote about the captivity:<sup>10</sup>

[H]e became the object on which the American hostages displaced and projected their own anxieties about captivity, about forced cohabitation, and about fears of rape from the captors. It was less about him than about them. So I chose to invent him as opposed to finding him (Raad, quoted in: Menick 2002, n. pag.).

The video testimony shows the 'witness' Bachar sitting in front of a drapery that is fixed to the ceiling. He has apparently filmed himself by starting the recording with a remote control. He begins by explaining in Arabic his experiences and the circumstances of his captivity. His statements are dubbed with an English voice-over translation spoken by a female actor:

Yes, our story is tragic. Yes, it is sordid. But you have to remember that it is first and foremost a story. And in this way it is familiar to you. I was held for 27 weeks in the same cell with five Americans. We ate, slept, talked, played and cried together. There isn't much that one can hide in a small room with five anxious men. Our routine was the same every day for 27 weeks. Nothing changed. After our release each of the Americans wrote a book and each book was published. In the 1990s five books written by five men who were held in the same 10-by-12-foot room have been published. Why? Why was the story told five times? Why were five

9 Raad, Walid: *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*, lecture/performance presented at Kampnagel Theatre, Hamburg, March 31, 2003. Other unattributed quotes in this article are taken from my transcripts of this lecture/performance.

10 Indeed, the hostage Terry Anderson talks about the so-called Wajd Domani, "a Syrian-born Lebanese press officer at the Kuwaiti embassy" (cf. Anderson 1995, 120).

different versions of it published? Because the story is not the same. Or as the hostages like to say: "Each man experiences captivity in his own way." No doubt this is true. True not only of the experience of captivity, but of all experiences today.

The video does not explain the political circumstances of the hostage crisis and the Iran-Contra affair. It is more about the cultural and literary dimension of the writing of the story of captivity and about the ways people try to come to terms with their traumatic recollections of the Lebanese wars. It is clear that the presentation of the archive footage is not so much focused on how to write in the margins of canonical histories, but is more concerned with the question of who is allowed to speak with authority about captivity. Raad again pursues a double strategy. On the one hand, he produces an eyewitness, a person who is supposed to deliver the most accurate account of the events in question. On the other hand, he presents this fictitious hostage within the framework of the *Atlas Group Archive's* fiction, which itself "creates a position that you can speak with authority about" (Raad, quoted in: Smith 2003, 129). To put it another way, Raad uses a fake authority and, in addition, raises it from a personal to an institutional level. By that, a complex framework is created in which authority and authenticity are both produced and challenged.

My point is to demonstrate that from one perspective, the boundary between fiction and fact is constructed, but considered differently, it is destroyed. Or, more precisely, Raad embeds specific historical evidence from the Lebanese wars between the poles of constructedness and conclusiveness. This generates a certain effect of oscillation between the reliability and the unreliability of the *The Bachar Tapes* as an historical source, e.g. when different pieces of information gradually become contradictory, thereby arousing the viewer's suspicion. A closer look reveals that the different visual and narrative elements do not add up. This already becomes evident in the prologue of Tape #17 when Bachar absurdly proposes to have his words – in Arabic – translated "into Arabic for the Arab world". But the most explicit clues for 'fraud detection' can be found in the end credits, where additional funding is mentioned as provided by the "Truth and Testimony Council (Lebanon)" or the "VideoNoise and Culture Institute (Lebanon)" – organizations that apparently do not exist. But *The Bachar Tapes* are characterized by a more subtle and intriguing detail, because the viewer's prior knowledge is decisively relevant for their perception: The 'witness', Souheil Bachar, is performed by a famous Lebanese actor, as Raad tells us, "so he is less likely to be confused in Lebanon. But outside, he is usually confused as a real hostage" (Raad, quoted in: Menick 2002, n. pag.).<sup>11</sup> It seems that Raad not only wants us to know but also to learn it the hard way that we – as non-Lebanese citizens – always look on (or even behind the scenes of) the Lebanese civil wars as outsiders and as foreigners.

If one takes a closer look at the structure of the video, the aforementioned tension between fact and fiction becomes even more striking. At the beginning of the video, a difference between the look of the 'found' and archived material and its presentation is artificially arranged. On the one hand, there are the technically perfect titles, subtitles and the subsequently added (studio recorded) female voice-over. On the other hand,

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11 *The Bachar Tapes* are supplemented by a fictitious interview between Raad and Bachar, which is printed in abridged versions in various publications (see: Raad 2002a and Raad 2002b).

there is the 'original, authentic', 'raw material' (the taped testimonies of Bachar) with artefacts, video noise and a voice that sounds as if it was recorded with the use of a camera microphone. Yet, in the course of the video, the boundaries between fact and presentation are blurred little by little so that one can no longer discern between the things presented as facts and the non-authentic presentational framework. And, finally, Raad reveals that the facts have been fabricated or constructed.

Usually – in historiography or TV documentaries – documents and stock footage are used as a means of providing objective evidence. In the majority of cases, they are shown to prove an assumption stated before. However, in *The Atlas Group Archive*, the stock footage itself is disclosed as a product of aesthetic decisions that allow it to appear as if it was authentic and factual by adding video noise and drop-outs. Thus the video mimicks the appearance of pieces of evidence. In other words, we could say that Raad performs acts of truth-telling. But this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Raad is guilty of fraud. In the case of ordinary forgeries, a shift occurs: it is a shift from produced material to false evidence. In the case of the Bachar-tape-fake, the documents are involved in a reverse process: a shift from pretended authenticity to an ever more explicit articulation of their own artificiality and fabricated nature. This becomes evident at the end of tape #17, when Raad reveals how the distortion – the authentic appearance – of the video image is produced by showing a continual degradation of its quality, which finally leads to chromatic aberrations, underexposed parts, over-saturations and hyper-contrasts. While ordinary forgeries use gestures of veracity to keep from being discovered, Raad exposes the fictitious rules of truth-production as fictitious, thereby undermining uncritical beliefs in and the reliance on the authority of historical presentations, be they telecasts in The History Channel or fact-based drama.

Hence, the distinction between real and imaginary is not clear-cut, neither during Raad's videos nor during his lecture performances. In this way, they become a kind of puzzle picture (*Vexierbild*), making it increasingly difficult to discern between fact and fiction. Thus the arena of signification and relevancy shifts from the domain of the presentation or from the speaking authority to the mind of the beholder, thus enabling him/her to question the assumed self-evidence of the presented documents, or to question the basic assumption of doubtless facts in general. But Raad's work is by no means restricted to the critique of official reports and the way historical events are documented. Raad does not even primarily intend to devalue the use of newspapers, in order to 'clear the land for redevelopment', i.e., to pave the way for presenting his own counter-history that is supposed to be definitive. On the contrary, his works are characterized by ambiguities, by an undecidability between fact and fiction or between historical truths and hysterical symptoms of the war. This is the crucial point in the final part of *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*.

In tape #31 the significance of the concept of the word puzzle picture (*Vexierbild*) and the connotations of its tilting effect become especially apparent. The above-mentioned video noises and images that usually occur when a VTR is started, stopped or the end-of-tape is reached are consistent throughout the whole video. Now, after the countdown, tape #31 starts with noise. Is it noise? Or does the 90-second shot show a heavily backlit sea? We cannot hear the sound of the sea nor any signal noises that could

help us identify it more accurately. Its content remains ambiguous as in a puzzle picture, as a kind of visual 'paronomasia', a rhetorical term that literally means "to alter slightly in meaning" and is used to denote words that sound similar but have different meanings. This has far-reaching consequences for our 'reading' of the image.



Fig. 1: Video stills from *Atlas Group/Walid Raad, Hostage: The Bacher Tapes (#17 and #31)*, English Version, DVD, 17 min., 2001 (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg and Beirut)

The puzzle picture, or the paronomasia, of the images of the noise/sea at sunset in Raad's video exemplifies the power of fiction and artistic images to reveal their own (visual) reality and the conditions of their visualization. On the one hand, one could interpret the noise/sea image as noise and, since pure video noise usually appears when there is a lack of video signal, read it as an *image* of a void, a metaphor for a lack of meaning. On the other hand, one could also interpret the noise/sea image as a view of the ocean and read it as a metaphor for a feeling that can be characterized as a yearning for eternity or infinity. Yet, both interpretations are simplistic as they forget that in this (double) image not only multiple meanings are juxtaposed like in polysemy, but also meaning remains latent, is set into oscillation and withdraws from a definite reconstruction by means of an interpretation.<sup>12</sup> In Freud's terms one could also speak of an overdetermination (*Überdeterminiertheit*) (cf. Freud 2000b, 76). Thus, the void is not only signified by metaphors *in* the image, but actually experienced by the beholders as they are prompted to an interminable search for meaning that can never be made fully explicit. One could conclude that the image cannot be exhaustively described and that its distinct meaning is subject to constant adjournment. In this respect, it is not an image of the world, but, to a certain extent, an image, or a picture, portraying the apprehending of images.

These wide reaching implications of multivalence leading to a ceaseless deferral of a distinct meaning, can also be observed in Raad's other documentary artefacts. For ex-

12 These considerations correspond to a certain extent to the thoughts of Werner Hamacher who developed them in another context (cf. Hamacher 1994, 233ff).

ample, another 'file of documents' in his archive is titled "Missing Lebanese Wars". Accordingly, it is strongly informed by the ambiguity of the word 'missing'.

## 2.2 *Notebook Volume 72\_Missing Lebanese Wars*

No matter whether one pronounces the title of the notebook as "*Missing Lebanese Wars*" or as "*Missing Lebanese Wars*", the word 'missing' can be understood in several ways. 'Missing' can stand for the failure to represent the wars or even the failure to speak about them adequately, as in 'to miss the point'. It can also mean that certain aspects of the wars are lacking in the official discourse that dominates the popular press. At the same time, it can also be understood as a longing, an intense desire to heal the wounds of the war. In Raad's words: "Missing has this idea of longing for, [...] yet the inability to arrive. It's as if you're always longing for that which you missed" (Raad, quoted in: Smith 2003, 129).

The notebook is part of the larger Fakhouri Files, documents attributed to a Dr. Fadl Fakhouri – purportedly a renowned Lebanese historian. The legend – in the double sense of the word – tells us that the notebook 'documents' curious horse racing bets by the major historians of the Lebanese wars:

It is said that they met every Sunday at the race track – Marxists and Islamists bet on races one through seven; Maronite nationalists and socialists on races eight through fifteen. Race after race, the historians stood behind the track photographer, whose job was to image the winning horse as it crossed the finish line, to record the photo-finish. [...] Each historian wagered on precisely when – how many fractions of a second before or after the horse crossed the finish line – the photographer would expose his frame.

Each notebook page includes a photograph clipped from the post-race-day issue of the daily Lebanese newspaper in Arabic, *Annahar*, Dr. Fakhouri's notations on the race's distance and duration, the winning time of the winning horse, calculations of averages, the historians' initials with their respective bets, and the time discrepancy predicted by the winning historian. Written on each page is also a brief paragraph in English, a sentence that characterizes the historian who won.<sup>13</sup>

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13 One description reads: "He is 71. But for 6 years he was in prison and for 10 years he was under house arrest and in exile, so those 16 years should be deducted, Then he is 55" (Raad 2002a, 7).

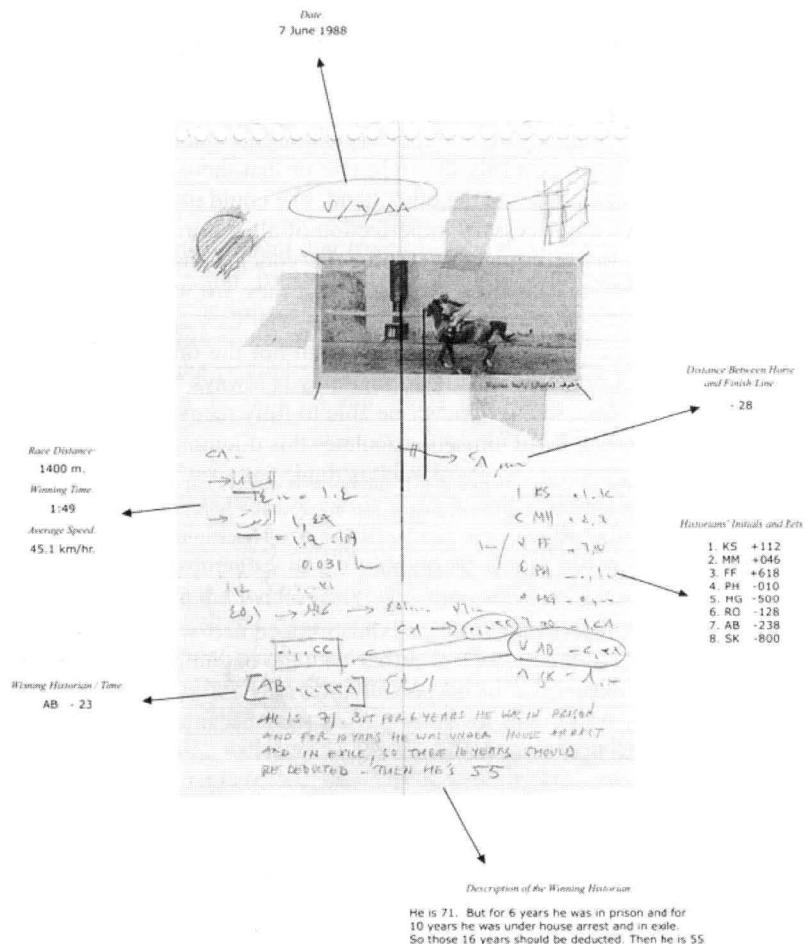


Fig. 2.: One of the notebook pages, including notes and the photo-finish of the horse race clipped from the post-race-day issue of the daily Lebanese newspaper, Annahar. The Atlas Group, Notebook Volume 72\_Missing Lebanese Wars, 1999. Digital Color Print (Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg and Beirut)

The notebooks are not only a descriptive account of the diversity of characters, temperaments and factions involved in the conflict of the civil wars in Lebanon,<sup>14</sup> but also a comprehensive reflection of the intricacy of historiography in general and of photographic documentary in particular. The 'story' of the Lebanese historians can be read as

14 Lebanon has an idiosyncratic confessional system of government persisting from the French Mandate in 1920. The Lebanese constitution determines a Maronite Christian president, a Sunni Muslim prime minister, and a Shia Muslim speaker of parliament (cf. Havemann 2002, 42ff). Accordingly, hospitals, schools and residential quarters are even today divided among religious denominations.

an allegory which illustrates the difficulties of meeting the requirements of an accurate historical account. Every historian seems to know that he can only bet on the degree of photographic imprecision, on how much the photographer will *fail to capture the instant* in which the horse will cross the finish line. On the one hand, the photographic documents and their accompanying commentary show that photographs capture only an instant in time and not necessarily the right one or that there was a 'before' and an 'after', which has been excluded. On the other hand, one could interpret this on a larger scale as an indication of the necessary imperfection of all historical documents, an indispensable weakness that considerably limits the conclusions that can be clearly drawn from them. However, this does not imply that they are worthless, but that one has to bear in mind that they always miss something, that they are always to a certain extent inaccurate, although they are more often than not the only evidence we have from historical events. In other words, historiography is always characterized by a belated interpretation and therefore will never be able to fully recover the past or to make the past completely present. Raad himself articulates this dilemma very clearly:

What is fascinating about these images is that the horse is always captured either just before or beyond, but never exactly at, the finish line – the horse is never on time. This *inability to be present at the passing of the present* raised for us numerous questions about how to write, and more particularly about how to write the history of events that involve forms of extreme physical and psychological violence (Raad, quoted in: Gilbert 2002, 40, emphasis added).

Another 'file' in *The Atlas Group Archive* is also concerned with the difficulties of coping with the 'passing of the present' or rather with the ongoing presence of the war. It is about the bygone experience of desperately yearning for a better future or about fleeting moments of yearning that instantly passed (i.e., became the past), and about projected future changes that never materialized.

### 2.3 *Miraculous Beginnings*

This is another file attributed to Dr. Fakhouri. It consists of a 27-second DVD video, purportedly a copy of an 8mm film. The 'document' is described as follows: "Dr. Fakhouri was in the habit of carrying two 8mm film cameras with him wherever he went. On one camera he exposed a frame of film every time he thought the wars ended" (Raad 2002a, 11). In the film, about 170 snapshots flash by quickly, every frame showing another theme or scene – images the viewer can neither remember nor fully recognize: 170 times that somebody thought the war ended, 170 moments of dashed hope.

Again a missing in the double sense of the word is envisioned: on the one hand, in the sense of an ever missing peace or an endless longing for peacetime and, on the other hand, in the sense of repeatedly picking the wrong moment to believe the war was over. *Miraculous Beginnings* is thus a bleak filmic journal of somebody who both imagined the end of the war 170 times, who as many times eagerly anticipated it and who, at the same time, was desperately wrong about the instant in which he supposed it to come. And to quote Walter Benjamin, the images of the film

are images we have never seen before we remember them. [...]. And it is precisely the most important images, those developed in the darkroom of the lived moment, that we get to see. One

might say that our most profound moments have been furnished, like some cigarette packages, with a little image, a photograph of ourselves. And the "whole life" which, as we often hear, passes before the dying or people in danger of dying, is composed precisely of these tiny images. They present a quick sequence, like the small leaflets, precursors of the cinema, in which we, as children, could admire a boxer, a swimmer, or a tennis player during his activities. (Benjamin 1995, 1064, transl. in: Fioretos 1995, 550)

### 3 Conclusion

Even if Raad takes into account that trying to talk about the wars in Lebanon is problematic, he does not resign by characterizing the bloody events as 'unrepresentable'. On the contrary, he is performing the necessary, perennial failure of dealing with the unrepresentable or rather with unrepresentability before the audience. Thus his research is focused on the multiple personal experiences of the wars in Lebanon, which have not been worked through yet and which can only be represented fragmentarily and distortedly.

As noted above, Raad uses very high archive inventory numbers for his documents and thus pretends to have many more archival documents than those he actually presents. This can also be read as a quantitative metaphor for the aforementioned 'missing', because the individual member of the audience is always left with the suspicion that he actually does not have the whole story, that the published *Atlas Group*-documents are only a part of a bigger whole. Moreover, by seemingly accumulating a huge corpus of historical evidence, Raad plays with the imaginary historiographic vision of totality and therefore brings to mind "the inability to ever finally arrive – even in retrospect – at a true historical moment" (Gilbert 2002, 42). In other words, the work of the '*Atlas Group*' exemplifies the withdrawal of historical reality and confirms that history cannot be completely represented, that it is necessarily characterized by instability and mobility of meaning. Through this fragmentary incompleteness the *Atlas Group Archive* denies a complete historical understanding of the war events. Anyhow, the insufficiency of the project is linked to the implicit declaration that the search for means to talk about the Lebanese wars, about the pluralistic 'mental realities' (in the Freudian sense) of the Lebanese wars and about the traumatic experiences of the people involved remains an inexhaustible task. And Raad makes it his concern to pick up the broken fragments of the past and to blunderingly set them together. Thus he writes an history of traumatic war recollections, a kind of history of the present. Raad maintains: "The story one tells oneself and that captures one's attention and belief may have nothing to do with what happened in the past, but that's the story that seems to matter in the present and for the future" (Raad, quoted in: Nakas 2006, 52).

This continuous presence of the war and of its impacts can be associated with the recent outbreaks of the Lebanon crisis, which sadly confirm that despite the official proclamation of the end of the civil war in 1991, the situation in Lebanon has remained destabilized and that the wounds of the war have not yet been healed. The bloody flare-up of the crisis in 2006 makes us aware that the potential for violence had been smouldering for many years under the surface of the fervent reconstruction and development efforts. In view of the latest assassinations of anti-Syrian Lebanese politicians one has to admit that Lebanon is in a state of ferment even after the recent cea-

sefire and that the conflict has not been settled yet. And Lebanon's confessions are drifting ever further apart these days, the country is still in danger of breaking apart along its denominational lines.

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