Staging Absence: Postdramatic Aesthetics in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997/2007) & Rabie Mroué and Linah Saneh's *33 Rpm and Few Seconds* (2013)

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Abstract

In the Aristotelian tradition, a character is a crucial theatrical element which gives drama its full meaning through the mimesis of action. However, in the postdramatic theatre, characterized by "subjecting the traditional relationship of theatre to drama to deconstruction" (Lehmann 2), the existence of a character, a well defined dramatic persona, was doubted or negated in a way that destabilizes the Aristotelian dramatic conventions. The character position was destabilized in contemporary theater via disconnecting the actor from representing a character role, becoming just "a performer offering his/her presence on stage for contemplation", (Lehmann 136), or through absenting the actors completely and replacing them with machines or multimedia creations.

In this respect, the paper explores the dialectics of staging absent characters in the two postdramatic performances, Martin Crimp's play-text *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) and its Katie Mitchell's performance (2007) and Rabie Mroué and Linah Saneh's *33 Rpm and Few Seconds* (2013). Absence here is related to the deconstruction of the psychologically motivated, three dimensional character as manifested in the central figures in the plays. The two plays center on absent characters that never appear on stage, whose identities are reinvented either to represent critique to the late capitalism as in Crimp's play, or an attack against the Lebanese political and social conditions as in Mroué's and Saneh's play. Reading the two plays from postdramatic/deconstructive lenses, the paper argues that Elinor Fuchs's concept "The Death of Character", and the postdramatic techniques discussed in Hans Thies Lehmann *Postdramatic Theater* and Derrida's deconstructive techniques, discussed in his studies *Specters of Marx, Of Grammatolgy,* and *"Structure, Sign, Play"* offer a supple framework for analyzing how Crimp, Mitchell, Mroué and Saneh dealt with the absent center.

Keywords: character, absence, theatrical presence, postdramatic, deconstruction

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Introduction

During the last few decades, theatrical art has witnessed drastic changes that constituted a break from tradition including dominance of performance over the dramatic text, disruption of linearity, engagement of the spectator, and intermedial aesthetics. These changes among others were described by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his book *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006) as "postdramatic" to signal both a rupture and continuity with traditional drama. Karen Jürs-Munby in her introduction of the book points out that post in postdrama stands for "subjecting the traditional relationship of theatre to drama to deconstruction and takes account of the numerous ways in which this relationship has been refigured" (2). The definition highlights how postdramatic theatre destabilizes dramatic conventions associated with traditional drama.

Character is one of these conventions that postdramatic theatre deconstructed and refigured. In traditional dramatic theatre, character is a key element that gives drama its full meaning. In her influential study of the development of the theatrical character *Death of the Character* (1996), Elinor Fuchs emphasizes that a character is the nexus that connects the dramatic world of the theatre and the real world of the audience. This connection is enacted by the actor, whose real-life presence "stands in" for the fictional character on the stage (8). Therefore, the world of the theatre mirrors that of the audience. If the character should stand for a real person, then, "the presentation of a fully-formed world on the stage is understood as a mimetic representation of reality" (McClelland 5).

What is crucial to the character is the sense of presence he/she creates on the stage. If an actor performs a role of a character, he/she should necessarily be present physically on the stage. This sense of presence is identified as Michael Goldman suggests as the unique informing attribute of all theater. In the theater, he writes, "we find a present beyond the limitations of the present, a selfhood beyond the limits of self. . . . We identify with actors because the self longs for clarification, because it longs to possess the present and possess itself in the present, in a way that ordinary space, time, and selfhood do not allow" (qtd. in Fuchs 70). In this sense, theatrical presence, according to Fuchs, has two main components:

> the "double 'now'" of which one relates to the dramatic narrative as embodied in the total mise-en scene. Here, the narrative becomes so present as to be happening now. The other has to do specifically with the circle of heightened awareness in the theater flowing from actor to spectator and back that sustains the dramatic world. (70)

In other words, the character's presence consolidates the dramatic world as if the events of the play occur in the same time of the performance, and the audience identify with the characters and what they represent. However, postdramatic theatre calls into question the concept of character, their sense of presence, the sense of identification between character and the

audience. Lehmann states that many symbolic experimental performances witnessed a "leave of the traditional 'conception of dramatis personae as self-contained figures'" (60), drifting away from the whole, psychologically motivated, and three-dimensional characters. A well-established dramatic persona was doubted or negated via disconnecting the actor from representing a character role, becoming just "a performer offering his/her presence on stage for contemplation" (Lehmann 136). In this respect, representation becomes in direct opposition to presence, as the unity between the character and the actor who performs its role is split. Thus, theatrical presence is achieved not through the audience identification with the character, rather with the actor's performance on the stage. This idea was highlighted in Erika Fischer-Lichte's book *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), calling it the radical concept of presence, which she defines as "through the performer's presence, the spectator experiences the performer and himself as embodied mind in a constant process of becoming – he perceives the circulating energy as a transformative and vital energy" (99).

Relying on the performer's presence, while denying the character's to be completely represented was concurrent with the decomposition of dramatic cosmos in postdramatic theatre. This occurred "when the illusion of represented reality was consistently abandoned" (Lehmann 60). In fact, representing reality was abandoned in postmodern/postdramatic theatre due to some factors. Firstly, representation was questioned as postdramatic theatre tends to seek to present material "rather than to posit a direct, representational relationship between the stage and theoutside world" (Barnett 15). Secondly, developments in the fields of technology intensified our sense of time and place which problematized representation as well. As Lemann states, "simultaneous and multi-perspectival modes of perception replace linear and successive ones. A more superficial and, at the same time, more encompassing sensibility takes the place of the more centralized and deeper one" (11). In addition, incorporating digital technology via mixing video, filmic techniques, sound effects and computer programs in performance disrupts the illusion of representing reality. From a postmodern perspective, reality was already inaccessible since all modern society replaced reality with signs and symbols, thus human experience becomes a simulation of reality. This concept of simulation was first highlighted by Jean Baudrillard to explain how reality disappears with simulation, creating simulacra, which is unreal image or representation of something, and the individual is surrounded by infinite playing of signs or floating signifiers (167). He argues:

> The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models - and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. (167)

Undoubtedly, interference of mass media and technology with their ability to create simulacra of real complicated the idea of representation in contemporary theatre.

This dissolution of the character in postdramatic theatre is paralleled with postmodern attitudes towards negating subjectivity, identity or selfhood. Postmodern emptying of the subject and negating the authenticity of the "I" resonated

with questioning the theatrical traditional form of character and its association with presence. Judith Butler in her book*: Giving an Account of Oneself* (2003), argues that the "I" has no predetermined authenticity but is constructed both in the act of speech and by the link with the person to whom it is addressed (38). In a similar vein, Hélène Cixous uses theater to undermine unitary versions of the self. The "I" must stop purporting to be a "true subject" and reveal itself as a succession of masks. "I", she wrote "must become a fabulous opera" (qtd. in Fuchs 18). In short, recent decades have witnessed an increasing shift in the function and formation of character in plays on critical and theatrical levels.

What happens to performance when the character is no longer the focal point, when the human figure is no longer the center of stage performance? This void that results from reduced position of character is filled with different ways. In contemporary theater, it is the entrance of multimedia technology onto the stage as an element in the performance that replaces the absent characters and creates the illusion of their presence. With human decentering and technological recentering, theatrical presence gains new meaning not closely related to the existence of human actors on the stage, but rather with multimedia creations that "simulate effects of presence" (Fischer 100).

In the discussion below, the researcher explores the dialectics of staging absent characters in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997/2007) and Rabie Mroué's &Linah Saneh's *33 Rpm and Few Seconds* (2013). In spite of their seemingly differences, both playwrights take what Charlotte Meades calls "a transgressive stance on characterization" (8), with characters that are absent figures leaving to the audience the burden of "tolerat[ing] the gaps and the assignment of meaning" (Jürs-

Munby 6). The playwrights create multiple identities for singular entities, Anne in *Attempts* and Diyaa Yamout in *33 PPM* are recreated multiple times in the plays, combining different identities, yet no single identity truly reveal Anne's or Diyaa's realities. Furthermore, both characters don't appear with their physical bodies throughout the plays, they appear as mere abstractions or reflections or even ghosts that haunt spectators to reveal the flaws of political, social and cultural structures that created them. In doing so, they contribute to the postmodern/postdramatic deconstruction of the self. As the technical production becomes more centered, 'self' becomes less achievable for these isolated figures.

Both plays are examples of postdramatic performances that break down the conventional play structure and adopt a deconstructive approach to theatre. Drawing on the postdramatic techniques discussed in Hans Thies Lehmann *Postdramatic Theater* and Erika Fischer-Lischte's book *The Transformative Power of Performance* and Jacques Derrida's deconstructive techniques, discussed in his studies *Of Grammatolgy*, *Writing and Difference,* and *"Structure, Sign, Play"* and his attack on the hegemonic discourses in *Specters of Marx*, the following discussion examines how staging absence adopted by both playwrights create a discomforting yet differently illuminating theatrical experience that place certain demands on the audience to decipher the intended meanings. In doing so, the paper navigates how the selected playwrights attempt to destabilize dramatic conventions of character and theatrical presence in the two performances.

Deconstructing the Character and Creating the Specter in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997/2007)

In his article "Structure, Sign, and play", Derrida states that inside every structure or a system, there should be a center, a point of presence or a fixed origin that organizes the structure (278). If the structure is disrupted, the center will be substituted. With the repetition of center substitutions, Derrida believes that it was necessary to revise the idea of the center stating "there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of present being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus, but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play" (280). Derrida's deconstruction of the center is not limited to the system or the structure, western metaphysics, or human sciences, but he applies it on "self presence…the subject, self identity, or …the determination of Being as presence" (280). Applying Derrida's arguments to the concept of character helps in destabilizing its traditional sense with its association of actor's physical presence and opens a new route to a new theater where characters are no longer the most important element in dramatic performance. In the light of Derrida's deconstruction of the center, this section discusses Martin Crimp's best known play-text *Attempts on Her Life*(1997) that established his reputation as innovative and ground-breaking playwright, along with Katie Mitchell's multimedia performance (2007), integrating textual analysis with exploration of performance features specially the multimedia elements.This performance was chosen in particular as Mitchell was acclaimed as a director who revived and enriched Crimp's text.With deconstructing of the dramatic conventions of the central character in traditional drama, the play was best described as with no center, in which signs replace reality and in which the meaning of presence is reconfigured.

Martin Crimp is one of the most notable British playwrights in contemporary theatre whose plays attempted to break the boundaries between stage and reality, challenging many dramatic conventions. His works, mostly political and satirical as *The Seagull* (2006), *The City* (2008) and *In the Republic of Happiness* (2012), are described as "unpredictable and reliably non-mainstream" (Angelaki 307). Avoiding predictability from the very beginning of the play, the title itself is confusing and carries more than one meaning. As David Barnett, in his article "When is a Play not a Drama? suggests, "while the title's pun has been acknowledged as both a series of experiments to apprehend Anne and to kill her, the second meaning has further implications for the practice of biography" (19). However, unlike biographies that represent a person life, Anne's reality is never revealed throughout the seventeen scenarios that compose the play. What adds to the text's complexity and incomprehensibility is Crimp's intentional removal of speakers' names and replacing them with dashes. In this way, it is not clear the number of speakers in each dialogue. Crimp adopts the postdramatic technique of disconnecting representation from presence, denying any sense of unity between the character and the actor who performs its role.

In fact, the construction of Anne as a character, in the traditional sense of the meaning, is subverted throughout the play. The character was replaced by void or as Elizabeth Angel Perez puts—"a *lack* of character, an *absence* . . . of character". First, Anne never appears, she is only constructed through narration of the

unnamed speakers who hypothesize who Anne is. In different situations, the speakers describe what type of person she is. Each scenario creates a new version of Anne. As the play progresses, Anne is recreated multiple times, with multiple identities; she can be a terrorist, a victim of political atrocities, a pornographic movie star, or an artist and in one of the scenarios, she becomes a car called Anny. Her identity is recreated in each scene in a way that she "encompasses the identities of the world around her" (Meades 21). When discussing Anne, Vicky Angelaki in her book *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange* states that "she is everywhere and nowhere, in multiple conceptualizations that cause her identity to fluctuate wildly" (54). In doing so, Crimp shows that the character is removed from a position of authority, denying the individual identity of Anne.

Reading Anne's character in the light of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, Rachel Clements compares Anne to the ghost, or the specter that haunts our globalized world. With her shape shifting and lacking corporeal body, Crimp creates a specter "as Anne, Anya, Annie, Anny, Annushka (and, in several of the scenarios, just 'she'), a proliferating ghost who appears, and reappears, and reappears. Rather than repressing the spectral, then, Crimp gives it structural free-reign, and uses it as a formal principle" (Clements 332). Since "haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (Derrida, *Specters* 46), Anne symbolizes a critique of every hegemonic system helped in creating her including late capitalism, gender inequality, women's objectification, racism and finally media hegemonic manipulation of people's lives.

From the first scenario, "All Messages Deleted" with human voices recorded on answer machine sending messages to Anne, Crimp alludes to how technology creates and manipulates human identity. The first scene relies mainly on phone calls, followed by messages. But voices manipulated by a technological device appear to be "lacking an identity. The messages are deleted. Humanity becomes an abstraction, coated in the technology it has created. Existence in the void is temporary" (Meades 23). It is worth noting that the first scene was omitted from Mitchell's performance as it implies the construction of Anne as "a single stable character" (Clements 333), which she avoids completely.

Later in the fifth scenario "The Camera Loves You", Crimp repeats the same idea of media hegemony and how mass media creates alternative reality by repeating some phrases such as

> We're talking reality
>
> We're talking humanity
>
> We're talking of a plan to be
>
> OVERWHELMED by the sheer totality
>
> and utterly believable three-dimensionality
>
> THREE-DIMENSIONALITY of all the things that Anne can be
>
> ALL THE THINGS THAT ANNE CAN BE. (223)

In the previous lines, Anne is created according to what the producers or advertisers want her to be, as it is decided in a later line that Anne can be a megastar, which is negated in the following line by questioning "a megastar? The F… you are" (224). The scene ends with repeating "the camera loves you" for three times, in a continuous reference of how our lives manipulated by cameras, or mass media in general.

Throughout the rest of the scenarios, Anne is constructed and deconstructed only

through language. Vicky Angelaki states that "in Crimp's theatre it is in language where everything begins and ends, where lives and identities are built and destroyed" (36). With its lack of context, and with the frequent use of "feature repeated motifs, discursive structures, phraseologies, and, on occasion, repeated lines, the language is doubted and the spectator is directed away from the speaker to the systems that construct the lexicons and syntax of the spoken" (Barnett 17). In this way, language does not clarify or help in creating a clear image of who Anne is. For example, in the fourth scenario, "The Occupier," some voices present Anne with set of features like naivety, which produce a reduced and simplistic vision of an individual. The dialogue opens:

> — She's the kind of person who believes themessage on the till receipt.
>
> — 'Thank you for your custom.'…
>
> —Yes. Then sits at the kitchen table to open it. She opens it and reads it as carefully as if it were a letter from her own son, who now lives in America.
>
> —Canada, actually.
>
> —She's the kind of person who believes the lucky numbers have / been selected ... (Crimp 221)

Anne's descriptions according to the speakers are stereotypical and tend to give simplistic views of her using a phrase like "She's the kind of person". What is more striking in this short excerpt is what Barnett describes as "divorce of the speaker from the spoken" (17). Actually, we do not know who is speaking, or the number of speakers in this part. In this way, the actor is completely separated from the character, he/she is just a "text bearer" (Barnett 18) that has no role except delivering the text.

Moreover, what adds to indeterminacy of the dialogue is that if "the first speaker is trying to distance himself or herself from gullible consumerism while trying to construct an individualized skepticism…,the recognition of the stereotype by the second speaker then confirms his or her implication in the discourse"(Barnett 17). Typically postdramatic, this part among others raises questions regarding the audience's ability to decipher the text and provide a possible context which leads to a sense of estrangement. In doing so, Crimp denies the audience the ability to identify themselves with the actors.

Furthermore, in analyzing the language of the play, irony and repetition are central elements that question the language originality and add a level of uncertainty that characterizes the play. In the sixth scenario called "Mum and Dad", a new image of Anne is created from a different perspective that describes her as a terrorist, who "wants her own little room and a gun and a list of names" and "A list -that's right - of so-called targets and their photographs. She wants to kill one a week then come back to the little room and drink Earl Grey tea" (Crimp 229). The ironic part is when one of the speakers makes fun of these descriptions:

> —She says she's not a real character, not a real character
>
> > like you get in a book or on TV, but a *lack* of character,
>
> > an *absence* she calls it, doesn't she, of character.
>
> —An absence of character, whatever *that* means ... (Crimp 229)

With ironic repetition of the word character, this part can be seen as a parody of the critical reviews that describe Anne's character or her lack of it. In fact, Crimp repeats the same parody technique in "The

New Anny" that mocks the language used in marketing, when Anny becomes a car. With this constant use of irony and parody, Crimp implies the meaningless and the emptiness of our culture. In an interview with *National Theatre*, Crimp notes the final scenario "Previously Frozen" is one of his favorites as it is about nothing. As he states, "It's really nice to write about nothing because in our media-driven, chat show, reality show, interview show culture, we're always looking for a theme and a label and the label on that one is Previously Frozen, which is sort of a meaningless, contingent label" (13)

With many Annes created throughout the play, Anne becomes more incomprehensible and inaccessible figure. The more identities she adopts, the more complicated the play becomes. In doing so, Crimp creates a world in which self-construction is impossible. This is related to postmodern deconstruction of the self, in which the self is unfixed to a particular realm, controlled by others and lacking free thought or sense of individuality. In this case, self "can become an abstraction, or an example of a concept…'Self' becomes unfixed" (Meades 20). This resonates with Derrida's previous negation of the center, denying its fixity.

If Crimp manages to create a frustrating play that avoids fixed meanings, and undermines all the dramatic conventions of the traditional character, Mitchell in her production added to Crimp's destabilizing experience new dimensions. If character's presence was denied by absenting the central figure throughout the play-text, the production intensified her absence by creating theatrical void in which human performers along with technical elements simulated effects of presence, without showing who the real Anne is.

Mitchell's production predominantly focused on using technology and media to recreate Anne, in which the stage is divided between "performer[s] and screens on which are projected digitally-manipulated images" (Leach 68). This signals the postdramatic shift, "out of a textual culture and into a 'mediatized' image and sound culture" (Jurs-Munby 2). In his review, Michael Billington describes Mitchell overabundant media driven performance as "on a stage crowded with lights, cameras and video screens, each scene becomes a new set-up offering us a different image of Anne. And, while this means the 11 actors are kept restlessly busy, it too often turns the play into a self-conscious media satire". Similar to Crimp's text in which Anne never appears, the 11 performers do not perform her as well. Anne is not represented by any performer. In addition, the images and live videos projected on a large screen are too blurry to decipher whether they show Anne or not. Clements discusses how Mitchell recreates the Derrida's spectral effect, in a scene between 14 and 15 scenarios, stating:

> Most of the company's female actors put on their red dresses and, one by one, slowly walked downstage towards one of the cameras and, having passed the camera, circled back to start the procession again. On the screen, the effect is of a stream of women emerging out of the darkness, disappearing in close-up to be replaced by another woman looming towards us. In performance, both the filmed images and those of the real' performers are seen; we see this figure, these figures, multiplied by 'the technology. An already evocative stage moment becomes moreghostly by the effects of the video images. (333-4)

The previous discussion echoes Baurillard's simulacra, in which multiple images create simulations of the real, but the reality is not accessible. This overcrowded

stage displaced Anne more and more. This overabundance use of images reminds of postdramatic concept of plethora or density of signs in which the huge number of stimuli "increasingly leads to a strange disappearance of the naturally, physically perceived world" (Lehmann 89), which is replaced by mediated world bombarded with contradictory signs. Combining cameras, lights, props on the stage emphasizes one fact, its "constructedness" (Clements 336). Anne in the play-text as well as in Mitchell's performance is a construct; she becomes more and more an abstract identity. She may be a product of the systems that created her as capitalism, globalization and mass media or perhaps she becomes the specter that haunts these hegemonic systems. In fact, neither Crimp, nor Mitchell clarified enough their intentions, leaving to the readers and the audience these intentional gaps to decipher.

Breaking Absence/presence Dichotomy in *33 RPM and Few Seconds* (2013)

If both Crimp and Mitchell undermined and subverted the concept of character either through language or performance with emphasis on mass media, images and live videos, Rabih Mroué and Linah Saneh in their unsettling theatrical piece *33 Rpm and a Few Seconds* deconstruct the character through highlighting the role of social media in creating a virtual reality. By exploring the performance, this section will highlight how Mroué and Saneh staged the absent character of Diyaa Yamout through the manipulation of technology that replaced the existence of actors on the empty stage.

Rabih Mroué and Linah Saneh are acclaimed Lebanese theater artists who are settled in Germany and known for their experimental, innovative and controversial works, such as *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003), *Photo-Romance* (2009),

The Pixelated Revolution (2012), which centers on the impact of mobile phones and social media on the Syrian revolution, and *Riding on a Cloud* (2013). Mroué and Saneh belong to the Lebanese postwar generation (1975 - 1991) of performance and visual artists who "began working across different media and genres, often mixing video with installation and live performance…that coerced the viewerinto a turmoil of non-representation, while not claiming any definitive political agenda" (Kasrouany 46-7). This play revolves around the suicide of Diyaa Yamout, a famous theatre artist and political activist in Lebanon, whose suicide triggers waves of responses and reactions that appear on his Facebook page, TV reports, messages on answer machine that take a life of their own. The play deals with the debate created by Yamout's death which is initiated by his family, Facebook friends, his girlfriend and political supporters. His death raised many questions regarding "Why did he take his life at a moment when the revolutions and uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring stirred hopes for change in Lebanon? Would suicide in a moment like this not have to be considered a sign of resignation? In which way, then, could his political project for a secular Lebanon be continued?" (Wächter) These questions are left unanswered till the end of the performance.

In a more radical version of postdramatic theatre, the playwrights subverted the concept of character on many levels. It is a performance with no human performers, the central character never appears physically on the stage, and is never voiced except for his suicide note and his automatic reply on the phone answering machine. Through the one hour duration of the play, the stage is void except for some props and technical equipments, including a wooden table covered with books, a telephone and record player put on the floor,

TV set, a laptop, a printer and a mobile phone in its charger. Behind the table, there is a wide screen, displaying Yamout's Facebook page that is continuously updated by people's posts, and text messages sent to him from his ex-lover. The play centers on the abilities of modern technology, especially the internet and social media, and how this can affect a traditionally human-centered performance. The stage setup "reflects the screen dominated age we live in, where personal contact and communication are increasingly mediated by technological devices" (Roach). It is worth noting that the title of the play *33 RPM* refers to the rate at which the record spins on the record player, measured by revolution per minute, and 33 is the most commonly used rate as it allows listening to an entire album without stopping. The title also refers to the whole show in which all technical equipment continued working without stopping, in spite of electric outage, signifying our technologically dominated lives.

This overlapping between technology and humans reflects a postdramatic reliance on modern equipment on the stage in many recent performances. Like *Attempts*, *33 RPM* shows how the human form can be manipulated by advanced technology. The human, previously the center of the stage, becomes a marginalized or non-existent part, along with techno-enhanced environment. In her article, "Haunting Performances", Wächter highlights that what distinguishes the play is the "juxtaposition of a fundamental absence and the hyper-presence of the various media (which in turn are based on physical absence) results in a compelling and insoluble tension on stage; and it is from this tension that the production draws its critical potential". Lehmann refers to this change as an '*anthropological mutation*', in which "the unity of man and machine" (165) becomes

undeniable fact, as the individual appears to develop into a collective component. In this respect, construction of the human self has changed, as what once signified an individual is now questioned, and subverted. Like in Crimp's play that opens with the human voice layered in technology, *33 RPM* begins with Yamout's voice-messages "DiyaaYamout, I will talk to you later, please leave a message"[1] Meades describes these human voices produced by technology as "transhuman, lacking an identity" (28), in whichhuman characteristics are filteredaway.

Social media plays a dominant part in the play. People's posts on the Facebook occupy the majority of the performance. The suicide of Diyaa Yamout, a piece of news that should only concern family and friends, becomes viral. This is related to the nature of social media that Richard Schechner discusses in his comprehensive book *Performance Studies* (2020*)*, stating that posts on the web "are performatives – words and images that do something. The stuff circulating on the web may stay limited to a small circle or may go viral. And once posted or shared even the most private material is forever there, in the cloud, able to go viral at some later date. Privacy is all but gone. We all expect to be surveilled, we know we live in the panopticon" (275). This is exactly what Diyaa's death has done. What was originally considered a personal decision or choice of suicide is transformed into a whirlwind of opinions constructing and reconstructing Diyaa's life and identity endlessly. His identity is no more than fragments from social media posts and commentsthat speak on his behalf. Diyaa's Facebook page becomes a public arena for a much heated controversy. The posts started questioning the news, expressing in Arabic, French, English and even sign language feelings of shock and disbelief. His death created conflicting views divided between

constructing him as a rebel, a fighter for freedoms, and an honorable person, or as a chaotic, atheist, and psychologically unstable person. These variations are shown in many examples as Ahmed's post "he tried to initiate a revolution, while the people are asleep", Mazen's "Alive or dead, Diyaa is respectable man. How we miss such rebels in our country that only see us ignorant fools, spies, or immigrants" and Ayman's short statement "Diyaa is our Bouazizi". In reality, Bouazizi was a helpless Tunisian citizen who burnt himself alive protesting against the injustice of authorities in his country, and whose death was regarded "as the catalyst for the Tunisian Revolution and thus the Arab Spring – whose act of resistance would inevitably spark the Arab Spring-style revolution which Lebanon has yet to live" (Roach). This reference to Bouazizi reflects people's hopes that Diyaa's suicide would ignite a new revolutionary wave in Lebanon. On the other hand, Diyaa, whose name does not reveal his religious identity as he could be of either Sunni, Shiite or Christian origins, was described by a friend as an anarchist. Other views established Diyaa as a victim to country's sectarianism. Finally, some negative views constructed him as "as a devil-worshipper (due to his penchant for hard rock) or psychologically instable individual, if not both" (Roach). Schechner comments on social media role as a powerful tool of shaping minds as "both personal, even at times intimate, and powerfully political both directly by means of disseminating and driving political opinions and actions and indirectly bybringing the personal into the public arena" (275).

Unlike Anne whose identity is never revealed in *Attempts of her Life*, Diyaa Yamout identity's in *33 RPM* is revealed from the beginning of the play, yet after his death, his identity is reconstructed in multiple ways, drifting away from his reality. Throughout the performance, Yamout is recreated as an online persona, a persona that is different from the core persona that is engaged with face to face interaction with real people. Nathan Jurgenson, the social media theorist speaks of "augmented selves," as "online personae that are parts of, not apart from, one's ongoing suite of selves. He sees the digital and physical as becoming increasingly meshed. In this view, there is a blending of hardware, software, and self" (qtd. in Schechner 287). If a human has a true self related to his real identity and a virtual self which is created online, the augmented self combines both. In Diyaa's case, his true self ceased to exist by death which allowed the online persona, or virtual self to appear. What appears on the screen is simulations of reality that replace the original.

If language and media created multiple Annes in different ways using images, and live videos, social media as part of the web omnipresence created new versions of Diyaa. This sheds light on the mechanism by which real life is falsified in the digital world. In the case of the story of Yamout's disappearance, what we see is a fictitious archive of events documenting a past that never happened. How social media can alter completely what individual identity is, was argued by Danah Boyd who states that "formerly identities were attached to bodies – even online bodies, avatars and such. Today, identity is linked to people's social network, to their interests, and to their online audience. That is, people respond to what others in their networks expect, need, or require" (qtd. in Shechner 285). Reading *33 RPM* in the light of Derrida's Specters, Diyaa, like Anne, becomes a specter, a ghost that is everywhere and nowhere. Derrida's 'spectral effects', including "the new speed of apparition […] of the simulacrum, the synthetic or prosthetic image, the virtual

event, cyberspace and surveillance, the control, appropriations and speculations", (67) can all be seen in the techniques that Mroué and Saneh used to recreate Diyaa as a virtual entity.

Furthermore, the absence of the central character in the play should not only be read as a postdramatic technique used to undercut the dramatic traditions, Diyaa's absence has a political meaning as well. This political meaning was repeated more than once in Mroué works as *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003) and *Noiseless* (2008). In the light of the sociopolitical context of the Lebanese recent history, absence is connected to social, political, cultural, and sectarian discourses that allow the disappearance of millions of people with no reasons. In this context, Mroué's work marks what he calls "the after effects of a chronically "traumatized society,"one in which absurdity becomes the commensurate accuracy with which to express the loss of a quarter million people" (Leaneagh). In fact, Mroué's and Saneh's choice of the name Diyaa Yamout is very significant since the literal meaning of the name is "the light dies" or "the death of the light", which is crucial to the sociopolitical conditions where Diyaa lived in. In a recent conversation with Belgian curator Cis Bierinckx, Mroué states:

> Absence has been a major topic in my work for many years, maybe because I do theater and theater is about absence. For example, when someone's playing Hamlet, then the real Hamlet is absent and the actor is trying to replace him. So, there is always this absence–the real persona of the actor putting himself forward as Hamlet when Hamlet is absent. There's also a very strong history– the modern history of Lebanon–in which 17,000 people, almost, disappeared during the civil war

[1975–1990]. Even today nobody knows where they are. Nobody knows if there are corpses or not, so they are just disappeared, and we live with this denial of these 17,000 persons.

> So for me, everything is about absence. I think absence is very strong, because it has this promise that something is coming, or coming back. The absence is not dead…But the interesting thing with absence is that the absentee is in this state, the state of being here, but we cannot see it. It's in a state of in-between-ness, between dead and alive. When a person is in this state, we never know when he or she will appear. We cannot declare death because if we do then the absent is no longer absent because he or she is dead. Or, if we declare the thing that we lost is lost and we replace it with a new one and we forget about the last one, we metaphorically kill the idea of waiting for something to come back.

Mroué's statements resonate with Derrida's deconstruction of absence/presence dichotomy. In his discussion of western metaphysical tradition, Derrida attacks the binary structures that dominate this tradition, where a single term becomes an essential or foundational principle, while its opposite assumes the role of the other. Presence/absence pairing is a central theme in western metaphysics in which presence as a foundational principal is linked to being, and "its matrix is the determination of Being as presence in all senses of this word" ("Structure, Sign, Play" 279). Breaking of the binary oppositions between absence/presence**,** Derrida explains absence not as the opposite of presence, or the nonexistence, rather it infiltrates the presence with its mark, leaving its trace. In

this respect, Derrida states that, "the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 53). Diyaa is absent presence throughout the play. The absence of Diyaa's body supports his virtual presence, as his lack of physicality creates what Fischer calls illusion of presence in which the more refined the techniques for dissolving the materiality of the human body, the more intense and overwhelming the impression of their presence will appear (100).

In fact, this new meaning of theatrical presence that is not related to the existence of physical bodies of the performers, rather to disembodied entities was predicted earlier by Fuchs in her book *The Death of Character*, as she states:

> In the games now being enacted in the electronic coils of virtual reality is emerging a much more radical theater --- than any performed onthe stage, for it is a theater that presents no visual images to the eye, but onlyadvancing scrolls of words.The players in these theaters are creating cyberneticdramas that push notions of "presence" into new, disembodied, territories. Inthese worlds, speech and writing, body and idea, presence and print, knownothing of former boundary disputes and appear in post-deconstructionist fusion. (91)

Finally, the empty stage of characters has another significance which is deeply connected to the position of spectators in postdramatic theatre. According to Jurs-Munby "the spectators are active co-writers in the performance. The spectators are no longer just filling in the predictable gaps in a dramatic narrative but are asked to become active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making" (6). In this performance,

the character's absence removes much of the sense of identification that the spectators could connect with. On the other hand, the hyper-presence of the various media put much load on the spectators that they cannot possibly process everything. In this respect, spectators become like "voyeurs, [who] enter the information bubble consisting of the fragments presented on stage and each of usconstructs our own story. It is, however, completely up to us to accept or reject the rules of the game. In any event, this meticulously designed piece makes for an original experience (Dispozícii).

In short, the physical absence of the central character in *33 RPM* is a subject matter and technical choice used by the playwrights to signify the death of an individual. Yet, this death created multiple identities for Yamout that obstructed his reality. Like Anne, in spite of his physical absence, he has become the specter that haunts the political systems, the cultural practices, and the sectarian differences that originated him.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of the character, a traditional dramatic element that is deeply connected to the existence of an actor performing a role and to the sense of presence that is achieved by the identification between the physical existence of the actor and the audience was eschewed in postdramtic theatre. In the postdramatic performance, influenced by postmodern ideologies of fractured reality, the character is deconstructed as it is no longer the most important component in the theatrical performance. This was evident in Crimp's, Mitchell's, Mroue's and Saneh's performances, in which the playwrights deconstruct the central characters of Anne and Diyaa by absenting them physically, emotionally and psychologically throughout

the plays, and replacing them with multimedia creations or virtual entities.

If in Crimp's play, Anne is only constructed via language through the dialogues of unnamed speakers who hypothesize Anne's identity, and video technology and digitally-manipulated images in Mitchell's performance, it is social media with its ability to create virtual realities that construct new versions and identities of Diyaa in *33 RPM*. In Crimp's and Mitchell's *Attempts*, Anne is absent but human performers still have a presence on the stage; in contrast, *33 RPM* takes the idea of absent characters in a new light by complete emptying of the stage and replacing the existence of performers with machines. This makes *33 RPM* a more drastic form of postdramatic theatre and adds to the unsettling sense it creates.

Furthermore, absenting the characters was accompanied by deconstructing the concept of self, emptying of subjectivity and individuality and creating instead multiple identities that are not close

to reality. With the absence of the central characters, what is left on the stage was simulacra, simulations that are not close to reality. Yet these absent characters reappear like ghosts that haunt the political and social conditions that created them. While Crimp absented Anne to launch a harsh critique against capitalism, misogyny, and discrimination, Diyaa'a absence in Mroué's and Saneh's performance is a direct attack against the political conditions in Lebanon that allow the disappearance of millions of people with no reasons. In spite of differences, the two performances *Attempts on Her Life* and *33 RPM and Few Seconds* reflect how staging absence adopted by the playwrights created a discomforting yet differently illuminating theatrical experience that place certain demands on the spectators to decipher the intended meanings.

Notes

[1] The language used in 33 Rpm is a mix of Arabic, English, and French and the excerpts used in the paper are translated by the researcher.

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