Beirut by Night
A Century of Nightlife Photography

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Abstract

Over the past century, Beirut has acquired a reputation as the nightlife destination of choice in the region. Photography was and remains a privileged witness of the proverbial 'Beirut nights'. In this essay I trace the history of the genre of nightlife photography in Beirut over the past century, from the grand ball era of the Mandate period to informal underground nightlife during the civil war and its aftermath; to the rise of the nightlife image-making industry in the 1990s and 2000s. I pay particular attention to the ways in which technological developments interplayed with historical and social contingencies in Lebanon—such as the Lebanese civil war and the disintegration of barriers between private and public spheres in the age of social media. Recast as art, digital nightlife photography is responsible for the erosion of 'vulgarity' as a social category under the twin pressures of neoliberalism and technological development; it also plays a major role in the contemporary branding of Beirut on a global scale.

Keywords

digital photography – nightlife photography – flash – Beirut – leisure

Over the past century, Beirut has acquired a reputation as the nightlife destination of choice in the region. Photography was and remains a privileged witness

of the proverbial 'Beirut nights'. From one era to the next—spanning the Mandate era (1920–1943), the post-independence years, the golden 1960s, the civil war (1975–1990) and finally the post-war reconstruction—social change has been deeply entangled with developments in photographic technology and practices. In the earliest period, photographers were almost exclusively professionals. Some worked for newspapers and magazines that featured regular reportage from society balls and soirees—the people of Beirut 'loved to be seen in the public', it was often said. As the century progressed, ordinary people became the photographers of their own lives. The years of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) constituted another watershed period in which photography moved out of the public sphere into private spaces that were more transgressive by the standards of the 'grand ball era', but also deliberately set off from the conflictual social terrain of the time. Then came the technological revolution: digital photography, smartphones, and social media upset older notions of what counts as public and what should remain private. Digital nightlife photography in the age of digital social media is responsible for the erosion of 'vulgarity' as a social category under the twin pressures of neoliberalism and technological development and it plays a major role in the contemporary branding of Beirut on a global scale.

In this article, I trace a history of nightlife photography in Beirut: the rise and fall of the grand ball era in bourgeois society; informal underground nightlife during the civil war and its immediate aftermath; and the rise of a nightlife image-making industry in the 1990s and 2000s that was spurred on by the digital revolution. I am particularly interested in the nexus of nightlife photography as a genre, technological development and social change—in other words, how technological developments interplayed with historical and social contingencies in Lebanon.[1]

Nightlife photography represents a vernacular photographic genre that has not received, until now, any attention from photography scholars and historians. Flash photography—the technique that dominated nightlife photography before the advent of digital cameras—has had a problematic status in the history of photography. Photographers and theorists of the classic era considered it 'vulgar' and even 'anti-photographic' in its violent alteration of natural light, which was seen as the very essence of photography. Flash was associated with violence both metaphorically (as aesthetic violence) and in real terms: flash

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1 This essay is based on long-term historical research combined with my own role as a professional photographer, and thus an active participant in the events described in the final (contemporary) part of this essay.

technology was embedded in the disciplinary mechanisms of the modern state and its methods of surveillance and control (cf. Ivy 2009; Martin 1982). But this is far from all that can be said on the matter: flash technology simultaneously enabled the camera to capture moments of leisure and celebration. If the flash has been predominantly associated with the dark sides of modernity, and, specifically in the Lebanese context, with war photography, then it is time to reframe its function with respect to 'fun' and festivity, or leisure and liminality, so that the full significance of its context becomes apparent.

Flash photography expresses modernity. In Beirut nightlife it was an element of an emerging and evolving set of leisure practices that is quintessentially modern. As modern subjects we have a naturalized tendency to dismiss leisure as 'mere entertainment'. But this tendency is one of the *effects* of one formulation of modernity, that 'sought to control both nature and society … prioritizing certain personality types and spaces in the social and geographical landscape and annexing others' (Rojek 1995: 56). The function of leisure in such a modernist order was as an annex to work—a space for pursuing activities that improve society; for example Boy Scouts, sports, or self-improvement hobbies. Beirut nightlife fits poorly into this kind of modernist rationalization. But if the rationalizing impulse of modernity put all aspects of natural and human life into neat categories, then it also inadvertently created cultural slipzones *between* the categories, and these could be socially productive. 'Nightlife' is one such example.

'Nightlife' comprises a wide range of social and entertainment events that can be exceptional (balls, weddings) or ordinary (having a drink in a bar). It may involve intimate gatherings of a few friends or massive crowds made up of social groups defined along class, ethnic or confessional lines. Large or small, in public spaces or indoors, restricted with controlled access or relatively open to anyone who pays—these situations are all moments of leisure. In anthropological terms these are *liminal* moments—'free zones' and areas of 'choice'. '[T]his liminal character is an unavoidable feature of leisure under modernity' (Rojek 1995: 101–102). Night and day are natural categories easily assimilated into the rationalizing order of modernity as well-regulated periods of work and rest; 'nightlife', a label for a set of socially embedded leisure practices, is noteworthy because it straddles a boundary between the natural/rational categories. But such boundaries are not to be taken for granted. Nightlife is a time when normative social roles and behaviors can be temporarily suspended; such moments of relaxation (or even reversal) of normal social roles, routines and relationships are typically organized through ritual, or, in this case, through ritualized entertainment. Nightlife entertainment thus brings together liminal time (the time between work and rest) with liminal spaces, whether these are nightlife estab-

lishments or even public spaces that are 'socially porous' by definition.[2] But just as they are marked with the meanings of 'danger' and 'excess' inherent in liminality, such moments are also supremely conducive to social performance— but in the right circumstances, also to commercialization. Ritual manages and contains the dangers of liminality; commercialization markets it as vulgarized spectacle, even as the need for more 'product' erodes the very boundaries that define liminality in the first instance.

As leisure, nightlife has an intense and yet complex relationship to photography. Here I trace an evolution of nightlife. One state in this evolution is the 'grand ball' era, a period during which a social elite emerged in a clearly demarcated leisure zone set within social hierarchies. Grand ball era photography amounted to a ritualized containment of the dangers posed by liminality. In the neoliberal age, the state of nightlife leisure is marked by the proliferating commercialization of transgression. The relatively genteel containment of social transgression ('nightlife', a condition of straddling natural and rational categories) in the grand ball era gives way to an erosion of the categories themselves in the pursuit of spectacle. And as we will see, in the history of Lebanese nightlife photography, the transition from ritual containment of liminality through class sacralization in the grand ball era to the neoliberal marketing of spectacle cannot be adequately summed up as a reflection of global shifts in the technology of representation. Civil war-era (1975–1990) nightlife photography first constituted a quasi-privatization of transgression that went far beyond the ritualized containment of liminality in the grand ball era. Moreover the marketization of digitized spectacle so prominent in the contemporary nightlife in Beirut constitutes a kind of grass roots place branding, the elaboration of an identity for Beirut that is by no means a product of 'soft power' often associated with the process of political branding (van Ham 2008), but nonetheless an implicit resource for the higher-level state authorities seeking to promote 'brand Beirut'.

The Grand Ball Era: Beirut as 'the Paris of the Orient'

All the people of Barut [sic] have a [good] voice and love to sing songs. We have the pleasure [of] hearing them [in] the night in their garden,

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> where they go eat and drink. (…) While holding a glass of wine, they sing
> a quarter of an hour before bringing it to their mouth. It is the most gallant
> Oriental manner.
>
>   D'ARVIEUX 1735: 345–346

Festivities always existed in Beirut. Public forms of leisure were provided by
hammams and cafés, which hosted storytellers (*hakawati*) and puppet shows
(Kassir 2003: 256). Reserved exclusively for men, they were associated with
lower-class patrons and considered vulgar and immoral by respectable middle-
strata families. The latter held their parties and weddings in private houses;
their entertainment was carefully guarded from the eyes of strangers. Due to
social, economic and political changes throughout the nineteenth century,
Beirut was gradually transformed from a modest-sized town to a cosmopoli-
tan city. A new class of merchant entrepreneurs emerged, and together with a
growing community of European expatriates, they formed the nucleus of a cos-
mopolitan colonial urban culture, characterized by new social habits. At the
turn of the twentieth century, opulent mansions were constructed on the hills
surrounding the old town, known by the name of their notable residents: the
Sursock, De Freige, Tueni, or Bustros. The gardens of these mansions became
venues for balls and dining parties, accommodating local elite families and
expats alike (see Bustros 1983).

After World War I, Beirut saw the construction of modern hotels, such as
the Saint-Georges and Normandy. Their bars, restaurants and ballrooms soon
became the new centers of social life, and especially nightlife. A 1932 guide-
book for tourists described the city as the 'Nice of the Levant', although Beiruti
bourgeoisie (to whom 'Nice' sounded too provincial) would have preferred the
analogy of a 'Switzerland of the East' or a 'Paris of the Overseas' (Kassir 2003:
359). Hotels became the site of grand balls, organized by individuals or institu-
tions, clubs or charitable associations. All of these ritualistic occasions were
intensely photographed, and publication in regular 'society pages' of major
magazines was part of the ritual. 'Photography was keen to evince this [nascent
bourgeois] culture, which became synonymous with Lebanese modernity and
nationalism', writes Stephen Sheehi (Sheehi 2007: 187–188). Picturing itself, and
proudly circulating its own images in public culture was one of the ways in
which Beiruti bourgeoisie asserted itself as the dominant class, as it simulta-
neously claimed to represent the whole country.

In the 'glamorous 1920s', parties often took the form of fancy costume balls,
a trend not uncommon in other parts of the region such as Egypt. The Arab
Image Foundation holds two photographs from a 1925 costume ball in the
mountain resort of Sofar (figure 1). Each depicts a small group, seated on

FIGURE 1   *From the left: Wassila Naamani, Yvonne, wife of Aaref Naamani (dressed up as a man), Salwa Ghazzi Naamani (standing) and Wajiha Naamani Sawfar, Lebanon, 1925. Unidentified photographer.* COLLECTION AIF/ HODA NAAMANI. © ARAB IMAGE FOUNDATION.

carpets, wearing oriental costumes. Three similar photographs are reproduced in Joseph Chami's *Le mémorial du Liban* (2002). Alongside politicians and magistrates dressed as marquess, pirates and admiral outfits stand two future presidents of Lebanon, Alfred Naqqache (from 1941 to 1943) and Bechara El Khoury (from 1943 to 1952), clad in Roman togas.

The 1930s brought about new advances in photographic technology. It was now possible (or easier) to photograph people in motion. Professional photographers snapped photos of dancing guests during dinner parties, and later sold them the photographs. Many ended up in private albums, such as the one shown in the next example (figure 2a and 2b). Dating to the late 1930s, this album belonged to a young lady. The 24 black cardboard pages show her always smiling, posing with her fiancé (a French officer) and friends during a range of leisure activities in the mountains, beach resorts, restaurants and balls. The Saint-Georges hotel is featured several times; the name 'Gulbenk', a major studio photographer in Beirut who had an agent working in the hotel—among other fashionable spots—is stamped on the reverse. Four pictures in the album are nightlife shots inside the hotel. One picture shows the lady, her boyfriend and six other gentlemen, two military and four civilians. They all are facing the photographer in a playful pose, two of them kneeling on the floor. This photo

was captured during a ball at the Saint-Georges, but not inside the ballroom itself (figure 2a). The merry company poses in the hotel lounge, and the composition gives an informal 'behind the scenes' impression.

Three photographs in the album depict people dancing. One is a general view shot from a high point with a deep perspective; others focus on a smaller group of guests dancing and smiling for the camera, clearly conscious of the presence of the photographer. The same photographers might well have sold photographs to both private customers and the press. This angle was wide enough to offer a 'general' view of the party and its festive mood, but also allowed enough detail for people to recognize themselves, and to buy a print—or, indeed, to be recognized by others.

Similar shots regularly appeared in the press, in specially dedicated 'society pages'. *La Revue du Liban* (starting in Paris in 1928, but soon moving to Beirut) was one such venue in which the high life of the Lebanese bourgeoisie was chronicled for over three-quarters of a century. With independence, the social profile of the Lebanese bourgeoisie changed somewhat; the commercial and financial oligarchy that came to power with independence became known as 'the consortium', (Traboulsi 2007: 115); it comprised some thirty families around the nucleus of the president, his own family and courtiers. To this was added the rich and famous, whose privilege derived from association with the consortium. Whether caught at weddings, diplomatic receptions, balls or beach parties, some people were present in almost every issue. The same was true for certain locations: avoiding Les Caves du Roy, for instance, would have been unthinkable for any aspiring magazine, just as not being 'in the picture' (or in the magazine) entailed social suicide for upwardly mobile individuals.

From the perspective of observers extraneous to the events, these images of the grand ball era nightlife appear repetitive and even 'boring'. The same feeling pervades us when looking at contemporary digital photographs of Beiruti nightlife, though what could be photographed then and what *must* be photographed now changed substantially, as I discuss below. But both then and now, these seemingly repetitive and ritualized shots were deemed important enough to be taken again and again: they were socially potent for the clients/subjects, and a good business for the photographer. Being captured in these pre-scripted shots had an important social currency: beyond functioning simply as souvenirs of memorable nights, such images were important assertions of the subjects' belonging to a particular class. These images and albums can thus be read as ego-documents, constructing and asserting the belonging to social worlds defined by class and culture. Similarly, the society pages in illustrated magazines are in fact social maps that picture the 'who and where' of local bourgeois society, both pre- and post-independence.

FIGURES 2   (*a, b*) *Merry company and people dancing at a ball in the Saint Georges Hotel, Beirut, Lebanon, late 1930s.* PHOTO GULBENK. PRIVATE COLLECTION. © PHOTO GULBENK.

FIGURE 3   *'Gellab' merchant and actor Gerard Avedissian with an unidentified woman outside
Les Caves du Roy. Beirut, Lebanon, early 1970s.* UNIDENTIFIED PHOTOGRAPHER.
© *LES LIBANAIS ET LA VIE AU LIBAN*, VOL. II, ED. ASMA FREIHA AND
VIVIANE GHANEM, DAR ASSAYAD, 1992.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Lebanon entered a 'Golden' or 'Gilded Age' (Khalaf 2002: 151–203), as a regional leisure and fun destination par excellence (see Armbrust 2006 for its echo in Egyptian popular culture). Beirut became famous for its nightclubs, bars, music halls and cabarets (Casino du Liban and the Phoenicia Hotel counted among the most renown)—a particular branding of the city that returned half a century later. Many, such as Les Caves du Roy, a nightclub in the Excelsior Hotel, reached global fame and attracted celebrities such as Frank Sinatra and Jacques Brel. A renowned shot by Magnum photographer Inge Morath captures its subtle atmosphere, rendered almost otherworldly or surreal through its neo-Mesopotamian sculptures.[3] Another shot shows the 1960s golden youth dancing madly on the dance floor, overflowing into the street (figure 3).

Photographers were ever present, and the range of formats offered to paying customers diversified. Among the most iconic photo-objects of this era were the Phoenicia Hotel souvenir cards, such as those produced by Photo Issa

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3   Online at http://www.magnumphotos.com/image/NYC61847.html, accessed 16 November
    2014.

Frères. They consisted of a folded glossy paper card with either a photo of the hotel with an illustration representing an oriental coffee waiter, or the logo of Le Paon Rouge nightclub on its cover (figure 4a). The print inside the fold was mounted in a passe-partout, protected by a translucent sheet with diverse patterns. The photograph was developed only in its center, with the corners fading out. The figure (usually a lady) appeared alone, neighboring figures were erased, in a blurred oval or engrailed shape. Like a diva on a stage, she alone attracts the gaze of the spectator (figure 4b). The example here also reveals Barthe's *punctum* (an unintended detail that makes the photograph unique): the ghostly hand of an invisible man hangs over her shoulder, reminding us that she is but a part of larger social setting—maybe even just an extra in a spectacle.

The peak of the ball trend in Lebanon was reached in 1964: this was the charity 'Bal des Petits Lits Blancs', the most extravagant nightlife event that ever took place in Lebanon, held at Beiteddine Palace. Hundreds of overseas guests traveled to Beirut for the occasion, accompanied by their jewelry and the renown Parisian hairdresser Alexandre de Paris. Written and oral accounts recall it as a 'summit of elegance' as designers, including Christian Dior, Lanvin and Nina Ricci, created special haute couture dresses for the occasion. The event was highly mediated. Photo-reportages publicizing lavish preparations for the ball kicked off one month earlier (see *L'Hebdo Magazine* 4 June 1964); and dominated both the Lebanese and the French press during the two-day event. *La Revue du Liban* (4 July 1964) carried an extensive reportage on the arrival of foreign personalities in Lebanon, and documented their stay from beach to nightclub. France's *Le Figaro* printed a special issue dedicated to the occasion, and distributed it to the 2,500 guests. Among the most iconic shots of the occasion are those showing the arrival of guests to the palace on a red carpet through of guard of honor (figure 5); or a close up of Geraldine Chaplin and other nobility at a table (figure 6). This photograph recalls the earlier figure of a lady at the Phoenicia Hotel (figure 3)—except that here, Geraldine Chaplin does not need to be 'made into a star' through print manipulation: she *is* a star, and the presence of other glamorous faces around her only increases her glamour. Also here we find a revealing detail: the presence of a photographer in the upper right corner, dressed in a tuxedo, and armed with a twin lens Rolleiflex and an external flash lighting device. The night ended at dawn with the party, in all their splendid attire, watching the sunrise at the Baalbeck temple (figure 12).

In 1975, the civil war began. The destruction of Beirut's historical center, displacement, destruction and death put an end to the dolce vita. The party was over. When hostilities occasionally subsided, festivities resumed as if nothing

FIGURE 4   (*a, b*) *Phoenicia Hotel Souvenir card. Cover and inside print: Annie Buchakjian,*
            1960s. PHOTO ISSA FRÈRES. COLLECTION ANNIE AND SARKIS BUCHAKJIAN.
            © PHOTO ISSA FRÈRES.

FIGURE 5   *Bal des Petits Lits Blancs. Guests entering on a red carpet lined with the guard of honor. Beiteddine, Lebanon, 1964.* UNIDENTIFIED PHOTOGRAPHER. © *LES LIBANAIS ET LA VIE AU LIBAN*, VOL. II, ED. ASMA FREIHA AND VIVIANE GHANEM, DAR ASSAYAD, 1992.

had happened. But times had changed, and so did the image high society presented of itself. Compared to the 'golden age', photographs from the immediate post-war era, even in color and printed on glossy paper, are always wanting, at least to those who have a personal stake in the events and histories they depict. The war came to symbolize an abrupt rupture between a mythical 'golden age' in which the slipzone between natural and social orders was a glamorous sphere inhabited by the elite, and an uncertain post-war present, mired in unresolved memories (Haugbolle 2010). In hindsight, the fact that it also coincides with the passage from black and white to color photography and print media seems symbolic. The color photographs of post-war glossy magazines appear almost aggressive representations of 'ugly memories', 'symptoms of vulgarization and impoverishment of public life' following the war, compounded by 'bourgeois decadence, mediocrity, and conspicuous consumption', in the nostalgic reading of Samir Khalaf (Khalaf 2002: 233, 312; see also Doherty 2008). The older, pre-war black and white images stand out in sharp contrast, their aerial quality recalling a mythical age that was as confident and pristine as it is gone. Here, a global technical development acquires a unique meaning, grounded in local experience and resulting in locally specific ways of reading images.

Two years after the end of the war, a two-volume book *Les Libanais et la vie au Liban: de l'indépendance à la guerre, 1943–1975* was published, devoted to the lifestyle of the Lebanese bourgeoisie of the golden age. Abundantly illustrated

with black and white photographs, this book was both a memorial and an
obituary: 'Would they have thought, all these photographers (international
agency photographers, press photographers, studio photographers or amateur
photographers) that one day, they would tell the story of an extinct world?'
(Freiha and Ghanem 1992: vol. 2, 701).

Underground Nights: The Civil War Era and Its Aftermath

Between the late 1960s and mid-1970s, a range of student movements emerged
to protest the rule of oligarchy in Lebanon; these protests sometimes led to
violent confrontations with security forces. Tawfiq Yusuf 'Awwad's 1972 novel
Tawahin Bayrut (translated in English as *Death in Beirut*), vividly describes the
violent repression of a demonstration, and Rania and Raed Rafei's documen-
tary film *1974: The Reconstitution of a Struggle* (2012) relates the 37-day occu-
pation of the American University of Beirut (AUB), when students protested

against increasing tuition fees. These intense pre-war days coincided with the growth of Hamra, a neighborhood on the western edge of the city, Ras Beirut. Surrounding the AUB campus, 'Ras Beirut's sidewalk cafés and snack bars have in fact become notorious for sheltering the so called coffee-house intellectuals with varying political shades and ideological leanings' (Khalaf and Kongstad 1973: 3). Hamra's public establishments became a new kind of social slipzone—notorious for its permissive atmosphere and decadent partying. The name, Hamra ('Red'), has been variously associated with communist ideas and with the 'red light district' (as captured, for instance, in a 1973 B-movie *Qitat Shareh al-Hamra*, which adopted a then-trendy psychedelic aesthetic while simultaneously voicing a puritan critique of lust).

The ignition of the war, in 1975, had an undeniable impact on the city. Taking risks, people continued to go out to bars and parties (one could perhaps make the argument here that the risk added to the thrill). Hamra remained a favorite spot for leftists and AUB students, although it lost much of its cosmopolitan flavor during the 1980s. In the coastal and mountain towns on the 'Christian' or 'eastern' side of Beirut, internal migrations unleashed a real estate boom. The party-hungry civil war era youth discovered 'the chalet'. Chalets were small housing units, part of a larger compound built by the sea or in a ski resort. Owned or rented as a second residence or a holiday home, chalets gained the added meaning of a 'safe house' in the event that war made the capital too dangerous. But in the late 1970s and through the 1980s, chalets also provided hideaways for Beiruti youths to experience prohibited things away from the eyes of their social seniors. This was in many ways an inversion of the ritualized *publicity* of the grand ball era.

This is not to say that photography had no role to play. Many such private parties were privately photographed, and the images then shared among guests. The use of flash lighting was necessary, but it was also tricky for amateurs. Most people I interviewed agree on the poor quality of images from this period.[4] Images taken by professional photographers are of much higher quality. Lebanese and foreign correspondents were regulars at these private parties, which they photographed as guests, not as reporters. Professional photographers Aline Manoukian, Fouad Elkoury and Patrick Baz remember carrying around the same camera they used for field assignments. Figure 7 shows a 1984 shot by Elkoury of one such civil war era party. Held in the countryside of East

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4 This paragraph is based on a survey I conducted in February 2014. Fifty respondents from different social groups were addressed based on their age (they were in their 20s or 30s during the war period); they were asked to reminisce on the photographic practices during nightlife events and parties of the civil war and on what happened to their photographs afterwards.

FIGURE 7   *At Serge Brounst's House. Ghazir, Lebanon, 1984.* FOUAD ELKOURY. © FOUAD
ELKOURY.

FIGURE 8   *Acid bar, Beirut, Lebanon, 1999.* FOUAD ELKOURY. © FOUAD ELKOURY.

Beirut, the scene shows male dancers, musicians and guests in a vaulted hall. The ancestral setting, lit by candles (perhaps because of a power cut) makes Elkoury's image appear out of time. Guests were usually too intoxicated to react to the presence of a camera, especially when handled by a friend, and not a stranger. There was little danger that such images would escape the trusted circle of friends, and social networks had not yet made the notion of privacy and rights as acute as it is today.[5] Photographs capturing 'illicit fun' were often made, but they were usually developed in a home lab. Some, like an unnamed amateur photographer who shot his girlfriend naked in the snow, carried their film to Europe for development. Patrick Baz remembers having shot many 'hot' nights, leaving his images undeveloped. Once he used the lab of a local newspaper he worked for to develop his film. Remnants of his prints were eventually found by his boss in the lab's garbage, and Baz's collaboration with the newspaper was promptly ended.

Decades later, most of these photographs remain stowed away. They capture private lives that photographers agree should remain private. The transgressions that they record, no longer 'contained' by confidently normatized social structures, could not be publicly mediated. Consequently photographs of informal nightlife of the civil war era (the 1970s to 1990s) are much harder to come by, compared to those of the early twentieth-century gala soirees. For this article, I contacted 50 people, including photographers, journalists, club owners and socialites. Fewer than half answered my query. Of those who did, most confirmed that plenty of photographs had been taken, but they were currently unavailable. For some, their houses were occupied and/or looted, and their possessions lost or destroyed in the turmoil. The necessity of moving frequently from one house to another in search of safety has led to the loss of objects. For others, photographs from their youth remained with ex-wives or ex-girlfriends. But in the few cases when images of civil war era nightlife are accessible, there is a marked resistance to show them. My query was dismissed as 'this is old stuff, forget about it'; or 'this is confidential material'. This reluctance to show photographs is only partly due to the potentially illicit nature of the moments captured on camera, or to the practical reasons cited, such as physical destruction, loss or fractured relationships. More likely, they reflect the much deeper process of active forgetting, an overwhelming unwillingness to remember and to 'face the past' that pervades Lebanese society (or sections of it) since the end of the civil war (Haugbolle 2010; Mermier and Varin 2010).

The civil war ended in 1990, and Beirut's nightlife resumed. It became fashionable to hold parties in unusual spaces such as garages, abandoned factories

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5   This paragraph is based on reminiscences and reflections of Manoukian, Baz and Elkoury.

and warehouses, or ruins of historical monuments. Beirut's nightlife assumed a post-apocalyptic atmosphere, filled simultaneously with euphoria and despair, reminiscent of a trend that emerged in Central Europe with the fall of the Berlin Wall and rave parties held at Goa or Ibiza. *L'Orient Express*, an ephemeral monthly magazine edited by the late journalist and historian Samir Kassir from 1996 to 1998 both captures and cultivates this atmosphere on its pages.

The 2006 Israeli attack on Lebanon signaled the upcoming end of the post-war era. Lebanon was back at war. As Beirut was filled with thousands of refugees escaping from the South, the city's more privileged inhabitants fled to the mountains for safety. A few bars, Torino and Dragonfly among them, kept their doors open to those who stayed. In the aftermath of this 33-day war, Gilbert Hage produced *With Strings Attached*, a series of photographs in a bar setting that framed seated women's butts revealing their pantie's strings (figure 9). Similarly, Gilbert Hage used his mobile phone camera to shoot cleavages of women seated in a bar. His series *Phone*[*ethics*] (2006) foregrounds the emerging question of the vulnerability of privacy in the face of new imaging technologies.

These now-classic photo series signal the emergence of nightlife photography in Lebanon as a neoliberal form of *art* that became emblematic of 'brand Beirut'. Art photography emerged in Lebanon in the early 2000s as a new niche in the art market; it was heavily inspired by themes drawing on the city's nightlife. This is only partially explained by global trends in art photography, and should be read, rather (or also), within a distinctly local set of meanings and associations whereby the excess and performativity of nightlife becomes intelligible in contrast to the 'normalcy' of war and destruction. This 'normalcy' is in itself surreal and unpredictable; hence the performative liminality of nightlife (and even more so, of nightlife photography) as both dependent on and a means of subverting the 'normal', that is, it tries to 'outdo' it.

In the aftermath of the 2006 war, political and social tensions in Lebanese society were explosive. Partying became a way to escape an anguishing and surreal reality. From 2006 to 2009, an underground scene emerged more dramatically than ever. I started going out with a digital Leica D-Lux3. The camera was discrete, I rarely used a flash and, similar to my predecessors, no one raised any objections. Rather than dance scenes, the lens captured intimate close-ups, illicit products and bodies in explicit erotic postures. At the *Nighthawks* exhibition (Buchakjian 2008) all sensitive content was removed and all subjects signed a model release. Even given Nan Goldin and Antoine d'Agata as inspirations, in this milieu exceeding ethical and social limits was ill-advised (figure 10).

FIGURE 9   *"With Strings Attached".* COLOR PHOTOGRAPH GILBERT HAGE. BEIRUT,
LEBANON, 2006. © GILBERT HAGE.

In retrospect, it is clear that *Nighthawks* was the only collection of this kind
of nightlife photography to have been exhibited in public. Does it stand in
continuity with the unseen photos of the 1970s to 1990s? On the one hand,
these were different periods, contexts and techniques. On the other hand, these
post-2006 parties were the last of their kind: the last to have a confidential
mode, although digital social networking sites already existed by 2007. At
the show's opening, Beiruti trendsetters were surprised, often disappointed,
with their own images; they did not find them glamorous or 'daring' enough.
Instead, there was something melancholic and gloomy about them. Visiting
Beirut a year later, *Beaux-Arts Magazine*'s assistant chief editor, Anne Picq,
perhaps appropriately described these images as 'war photographs'. When the
curators of Noorderlicht Photography Foundation undertook the selection of
Metropolis: City Life at the Urban Age, they included *Nighthawks* in a chapter
titled 'Deficient', and described them as snapshots of a 'hostile city, where
man-made problems make a decent life more difficult' and where 'the dream
has become a nightmare' (Melis 2011: 113).

FIGURE 10   *"Behind the Bars," from the* Nighthawks *series.* COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS GREGORY
BUCHAKJIAN. BEIRUT, LEBANON, 2007. © GREGORY BUCHAKJIAN.

Nightlife Photography and Online Social Networks:
The Exhibitionist Generation

The immediate post-civil war era in Lebanon, known as 'reconstruction', has
affected Beirut in dramatic ways. Remnants of the largely destroyed city cen-
ter were razed to make space for an entirely new exclusive neighborhood that
caters to regional and global elites. Surrounding areas have also undergone
selective gentrification, becoming the new sites of urban leisure and nightlife.
They include Monnot (becoming fashionable circa 1998), Gemmayzeh (circa
2004), Hamra (circa 2008), Mar Mikhael (circa 2010) and Badaro (circa 2014).
Except Hamra, with its own tradition of bohemian and fashionable hangouts,
new exclusive bars and nighclubs were badly received by local communities.
Other spots, such as B018, popped up on the city's edges. B018 was, in the mid-
1990s, an alternative club where a marginal clientele comprising artists, intel-
lectuals and gays gathered.[6] In the late 1990s Fouad Elkoury captured its vibrant
night scene in his series titled *Illusions*, which, however, was never shown in
public apart from a few photographs available on his website (figure 8).

6   B018 still exists, but is considered to have lost its edge.

The new nightlife of the early twenty-first century shared the scale of grandeur with the pre-war era, and the sense of depravity of underground life in the civil war era. But things were changing. In 1999, photography was prohibited at one of the most notorious night outlets, the gay-oriented Acid club (Elkoury interview, 9 February 2014). Only few years later, such a restriction was unthinkable, not only because it was inefficient, but also because attitudes toward what can be photographed (and, by extension, instantaneously shared through social networks) and what ought to remain private had changed drastically over the past decade. Despite—or perhaps precisely *because of*—looming war and political unrest, the decade from 2000 to 2010 saw the apogee of gigantic nouveau riche indoor and open-air clubs that accommodated thousands of guests. From Crystal, where fireworks would rise over each table ordering a bottle of champagne, to Skybar, built as an amphitheater so that guests, like voyeurs, could contemplate girls' bodies leaning over the bar, there emerged a marked institutionalization of decadence. Parties became widely publicized through numerous snapshots and videos made by clients or professional photographers alike (the successors of yesteryear's studio photographers), and then uploaded on designated websites such as BeirutNightlife.com. But also in contrast to the grand ball era, photography no longer recorded the discreet transgressions of a cosmopolitan elite; its function became one of continually raising the stakes in a 'vulgarity arms race'.

Decadent parties became the pride of the city and a vitrine for the whole country. Sometimes, remnants of cocaine would still be visible on tables or in bathrooms, just as the dance floor gleamed on the front page of magazines, featured on websites, coffee table books, TV shows and promotional films for the ministry of tourism, including the country's flagship carrier, Middle East Airlines. Reconstruction-era Beirut was branded, both regionally and globally, by its glamorous and wild nightlife as a destination of choice for jetsetting partygoers. In some ways, such branding echoes the gilded age of the 1960s. But in other ways, and importantly for my argument, the participants' attitudes toward photographs (and by extension, toward privacy, and more generally, toward the role 'nightlife' and photography came to play in the social field) had changed dramatically.

Two major technological developments colluded in this change: digital photography and social networking. Digital photography appeared in the 1990s but cameras were bulky and their images of poor quality. By the mid-2000s, these initial limitations were largely overcome. Unlimited quantities of photographs could be taken without expense. The advent of social media, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram spurred a never-ending cycle of sharing images that had previously remained stored in boxes, drawers, or occasionally pasted into albums; or,

a bit later, stored on hard disks but rarely printed. With the digital revolution, photographs had became not just easier to take and more ubiquitous, but also more transient, or ephemeral (Van House 2011). They now had to be shared immediately, or they would disappear forever. The new virtual materiality of digital photography comes with a new temporality. This ephemeral quality of digital photography affected the nightlife genre, by pushing it to become more shocking and memorable: no longer objects to be cherished in albums, conserved for memory, nightlife photographs now have a short life-span. In order to inscribe themselves on memory, and to *matter*, they have to make themselves 'memorable' by becoming ever more shocking.

This transient, ephemeral nature of digital social media photography is a global phenomenon, which here combines with specifically local meanings. Political unrest, public paranoia and the neoliberalization of security have led to the prohibition of photography in many public spaces in Beirut. 'Beirut has been crisscrossed with a variety of security mechanisms that occupy most of its public spaces' (Fawaz et al. 2012: 177), making street photography increasingly difficult. This encouraged photographers to turn their cameras inwards, into private homes and the clubbing scene, out of reach from authoritarian control. In twenty-first century Beirut, it is often easier to get a snapshot of people kissing in a bar than of the façade of a public monument.

What Barthes anticipated as 'the explosion of the private into the public' (Barthes 1981: 98) engendered new ways of photographing: an image made specifically for online sharing. People in clubs and parties are now photographing each other 'for Facebook'; or snapping their own images as 'selfies'. According to D.J. and The Incompetents band singer Serge Yared, guests snapping selfies are 'tragically bored and boring, not having fun, acting fake happiness'. The success of a party, according to him, is now measured by the scarcity of selfies: 'When people have fun, they forget about that'.

Smartphone cameras have not driven professional photographers out of business completely. Clubs and event organizers keep hiring them, and publish their production in print media and on Facebook. By 'proving' how successful the party was, such professional photographs encourage consumers for the next event. To distinguish themselves from their amateur counterparts, professional photographers have become more inventive. Aided by ISO sensitivities reaching impressive heights, they are no longer constrained by darkness. Albums posted by Carl Halal for C U NXT SAT (an itinerant clubbing venue) through 2013 and 2014 offer a very clear and airy, almost daylight aesthetic. During the party, photographers move around the crowd, get snapshots or posed portraits. Themselves becoming attractions, some photographers do

FIGURE 11   (*a, b*) *Ad hoc studio shots, Ajram Beach.* COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS TAREK MOUKAD-
DEM. BEIRUT, LEBANON, 2009. © TAREK MOUKADDEM.

not hesitate to behave ridiculously. The presence of the camera is sought-
after: being captured by the official photographer is considered better than a
selfie. It is, again, a proof of social notoriety and social 'sexiness'. Except that
now, presence alone is not enough: one has to virtually 'go out of bounds' to
stand apart in the virtual noise, the sheer volume of digital nightlife photogra-
phy.

Browsing online albums such as the C U NXT SAT Facebook page or Beirut-
Nightlife.com, one notices that the same faces appear over and over again,
suggesting a formal continuity within the nightlife genre over the past century.
The 'dancefloor panoramas' visible here recall the earlier shots of the grand ball
era (figure 2b); similarly vague and repetitive, they nevertheless give a visible
'proof' of the scale and success of the event. But the most sought-after pho-
tographs currently done by professional party photographers are close-ups of
a limited group of merrymakers in spontaneous, falsely spontaneous or obvi-
ously posed portraits (see figures 11). They resemble (or even trace their generic
origin to) the seemingly spontaneous shot of jolly guests at the Saint-Georges
Hotel (figure 2a). The current decade has in fact seen a tremendous comeback
of the earlier genre of carefully scripted 'behind the scene' shots. In 2006, for the
occasion of the first anniversary of the Basement Club, photographer Nadim
Asfar produced a series of shots intended for the club's anniversary gift card,
featuring the club's habitués. Asfar made an explicit use of flash (anathema to
art photography sensibilities as mentioned above), giving his models a spectral
presence.

As in the earlier idiom, such shots map a particular section of Lebanese
society. This jet-setting elite of a few thousands of partygoers, systematically
mediatized through the convergence of social media and digital photography,
comprises upper-middle and upper-class youths, many of whom are students
at private universities, and well-known figures in advertising, industry, media,
fashion and the art scene.

FIGURE 12   *Bal des Petits Lits Blancs. After-party at Sunrise inside the Temple of Baccus. Baalbeck, Lebanon, 1964.* UNIDENTIFIED PHOTOGRAPHER, © LA REVUE DU LIBAN, COURTESY OF BIBLIOTHÈQUE ORIENTALE - UNIVERSITÉ SAINT-JOSEPH, BEIRUT.

In their recent work, young photographers including Asfar and Tarek Mou-
kaddem, explicitly build on the old convention of the professional nightclub
photographer. They installed an ad-hoc studio with a tripod camera in a cor-
ner of the venue (a bar, a club), often close to the entrance. Guests were invited
to pose individually, in couples or in small groups in front of a set background.
Instead of the still poses of the olden days, however, guests would not stay still
or solemn. They would often jump, asserting that photography is no longer the
'documentation' of spectacular nightlife events, but rather, it has become its
own spectacle (figures 11a, b and c).

But some things are also very different now: people no longer censor them-
selves, as they used to. Whereas in the earlier era of glamorous balls, nightlife
photography was governed by strict rules of ritualized propriety: the illicit
nature of nightlife, the possibility of social transgression inscribed into the very
situation, was never supposed to be captured on camera. Here we see the oppo-
site. People compete to go 'out of bounds' for the camera. As the city became
branded through its decadent nightlife, liminality (the out of the norm time)
became the new norm. Nightlife and club-scene photography now captures
'the true spirit of Lebanon' as the BeirutNightlife.com website proudly puts it.
Going out of the norm through ritualized acts of being bad boys or bad girls
became a matter of pride, and capturing such moments on camera became
the new imperative: the 'trademark' image of Beirut as the global capital of
nightline fun. 'National branding' is normally considered to be a tactic of 'soft
power' manipulated by states (van Ham 2008). Here it emerges as a bottom-up
phenomenon facilitated by digital technology, albeit one enacted by a commer-
cial but no longer straightforwardly social elite. The problem is that the digital
production of this form of 'brand Beirut' operates in a kind of downward spi-
ral.

> In a world now consuming images as never before, what will be shown
> is what most paying customers want to see. What most customers want
> to see is, almost by definition, what a generation ago would have been
> labeled common, unwashed, scumular, barbaric, or *vulgar*.
>   TWITCHELL 1993: 2

In this vein, the contemporary Beirut nightlife competition to create ever more
intense spectacle becomes rather like an addict having to continually increase
the dosage in order to achieve the same high. Such circumstances compel one
to question how long the addict can sustain the habit without succumbing to
an overdose.

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