

A SLIT THROUGH THUNDEROUS CLOUDS

Carole LÉVESQUE

Walking on a path along the crest of a mountain where a political figure once came to hide from persecution, I paused to look back down the lower hills and valleys. The wind was strong and dark clouds were drifting over the land. The mountains were still lush with the summer's growth, villages, dusted between patches of pine trees, were surrounded by worn terraces tumbling down the hillside. Slowly a slit in the clouds opened and let a few sunrays pierce the thunderous atmosphere to fall with an exact precision onto what seemed the most central village within the view that was given to see. The white houses brightened up and the bell tower on the very top of the hill seemed to reach out to the momentary sun. For a few seconds, the landscape stood still and I thought: this might very well be the most beautiful place on earth.



Figure 1

A landscape is usually defined by all that can be seen from a single viewpoint, or as would be said in French, by all that the gaze can embrace at once. A landscape is therefore formed through a collection of elements that are distinctive from one place to another, that can be named and recognized as having an agreed-upon aesthetic value. And to be able to claim that a landscape belongs to here or there, the elements need to share traits linked to culture, history, topography, or climate, so that they build upon each other a cohesiveness that can only be possible within a given territory. What makes a landscape Lebanese is first and foremost the sea or the mountain, oftentimes both, but also cedar and pine forests, river beds at the bottom of deep valleys, winding roads, Roman ruins, thistles, stone or concrete houses nestled on the hillside, and agricultural terraces bearing fruit trees. From a time that no one can now remember, forests cut down, stone extracted from the bedrock, and leveling of the mountain for agriculture forged the Lebanese landscape. Calling any part of the Lebanese landscape "natural" would be an oxymoron. Indeed,

the transformation of the land(scape) is intimately intertwined with its resources, as well as the work of men and women who have found in its ground and weather conditions a perfect environment for securing a livelihood. Oranges and apples, pomegranates and figs, loquats and plums, grapes and prickly pears, mulberries and apricots: the variety of fruits grown in the mountains bears witness to the working of the land. With olive trees as old as a thousand years, agrarian practices are inseparable from the very idea of a Lebanese landscape. In fact, contrary to what might be thought, a landscape is not the mere addition of the natural features to the actions of men and women on a given portion of land. It is rather an intricate collaboration that is impossible to be told apart, because to cultivate the land is both to live and shape this land: the very act of sowing and the human activity this entails are integral to producing the Lebanese landscape.

There has been a long teaching of what a landscape is, how one should look at it to recognize the appropriate features and gaze upon them with pleasure. But when the idea of landscape was formulated somewhere in the fifteenth century, the land did not suddenly stop from being worked upon or from suffering all sorts of man-made or natural disasters so that the ideal landscape could be maintained. Not only did the land keep on changing, our conception of the ideal landscape, tributary to the social condition within which it is gazed upon, also changed. While the mountains first appeared as frightening, sublime, majestic, to then being beautiful and enjoyable, they were at the same time lived and understood by those who inhabited them as part of an everyday terrain that certainly had to be tamed, but that



Figure 2

also exerted a need for cultural adaptations. Whether in the mountain or the valley, the everyday experience of the land shaped a culture that required attention to weather conditions, to the soil's composition, to required distances to be traveled, to what the land had to offer, and to how one could take care of the land in return. In this way, an agrarian know-how was formed and its depiction became integral to how the landscape ought to be read because knowing the land—*connaître le pays*, participates in producing a country—*produire le paysage*. A landscape is therefore a spatial cultural representation in that it shows the relations a people has

with its land as well as where value is placed: a well-tended landscape, though not necessarily ideal, speaks of the socio-cultural as well as the socio-economic context in which it is grounded.

As a palimpsest, a landscape is forged through time, through incremental alterations built upon one another, building now the ruins of tomorrow, upon the ruins of years past. Reading the landscape therefore implies



Figure 3

seeing all that was and all that is at play: history, culture, economy, social traits, and their transformation through time. Seeing the Lebanese landscape now, partly abandoned, overgrown with what Gilles Clément calls a third landscape,¹ should not come as a surprise since a landscape can only express or translate the state in which it also found its associated socio-economic and cultural challenges. The natural aspect of a landscape is always secondary to how it is produced. Indeed, a landscape bears the marks of economic and social forces that gave it shape, that transformed it, that maintained it, that cared for it, in the same way as it now bears witness to the forces that neglect it and lead to its deterioration, both physically and perceptively. As the land was slowly abandoned for the city and various forms of urbanization, it was left for the devastating reconstruction processes to incrementally eat it away and to slowly transform its perception from something of value and adequate representation of the Lebanese ways, to something to which value can only be given if filled with seemingly economically sound enterprises. But it would be too easy to only blame the fierce construction practices for all the ills attributed to the current state of the landscape. As the Renaissance has taught us, a landscape is first and foremost a representation, a perceptive construction that corresponds to an ideal composition in which an equilibrium between topographies, shades, masses, and so on could be attained and seen from the perfect vantage point. Yet this perfect vantage point can only be determined by one who decides to pay attention: the object of landscape is directly linked to the initial subject. In other words, while the only possible counterbalance to the urbanization frenzy and its associated indifference for the land might seem to be running back to the ideal-romanticized, idea of a perfect landscape, a last and ultimate respite from the ongoing growth of both construction and abandonment, what is actually found



Figure 4

is a land forgotten by what initially shaped it, terraces overtaken by wild growth, tumbled-down structures, derelict aqueducts, and so on. Not the ideal landscape and not an easy lesson to swallow, perhaps. But what are the ideal landscape and ideal vantage point anyway? What if the ideal representation renewed itself in an acknowledgment that the state in which the landscape is now found is tributary to what was done of it and that what was done of it has not yet completely destroyed everything good about it? What remains—fragments of the longed-for ideal scattered through the neglected conditions—is part of the same cycle as are cultural shifts: it largely depends on where value is given and how we transform our discourses and representations of what is before us. If the actualization of the idealized landscape is no longer possible, necessarily, a new ideal has to emerge, one that is encompassing of the state of what is left.

To challenge the romanticized ideal and see the landscape anew, a representation has to be made, one that speaks of the present and one that shows the diversity and wealth of what is there. Instead of longing for an ideal perception that no longer matches most of what remains, and allow passively the actual landscape be overtaken by urban development and other forms of demolition, new vantage points have to be found so that we can begin to see, again, the layers embedded in the landscape, layers that still show signs of how much care was once given to the land, and how much care it needs once more. To do so, one must be forced into reflecting upon the causes underlying the state of abandonment the landscape has fallen into, and recognize the unbridgeable distance between the lost ideal and the present state of what remains, as might point out Sophie Lacroix.² While this process might seem to require long and arduous

efforts, it may in fact be as simple as being attentive to what the French definition proposes when it says that a landscape is all that the gaze can embrace at once: embracing all that is given to see infers that we look upon the landscape with the fondness of a longtime accomplice, even if what is seen does not immediately correspond to expectations. Embracing the land suggests that we be standing far enough to grasp it in its entirety, so as to understand its variations and attributes. But as it is with the embrace of a long-lost friend, it most certainly also implies a closeness, a warm and loving proximity, in which every aspect of the physical presence can be felt. Embracing all that is given to see thus necessitates a direct engagement with the land through a genuine practice of the land, seeking compositions between the sweeping view and the near details, finding again colors, textures, and slits through thunderous clouds, so that we restore value to the land(scape) that remains, brush away the yearning for something that no longer is, and begin to see the leftover landscape as something culturally worthy.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gilles Clément, *Manifeste du Tiers-paysage* (Paris: Sujet Objet, 2004).
2. Sophie Lacroix, *Ruine* (Paris: Éditions La Villette, 2008).

FIGURES

Figures 1,2,3 and 4. *The Thin Lines Between the River and Me* ©2018 CCATTARUZZA

AUTHOR

Carole LÉVESQUE holds a technical degree in architecture, an undergraduate degree in Design de l'Environnement, a Master of Architecture from the University of British Columbia as well as a PhD in the History and Theory of Architecture from the University of Montreal. Concerned with temporary architecture as a means to articulate exploratory and alternative discourses on the city and as a tool with which to engage architectural education, she published "A Propos de l'Inutile en Architecture," where these issues are explored at length. Her current work and research revolves around the architectural representation of derelict and vague spaces within the city as a means to challenge our acceptance of the derelict in our conception of what constitutes an acceptable urban landscape. She taught at the University of Montreal, the American University of Beirut and she is now full professor at the School of Design at the University of Quebec in Montreal.