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The "Lebanese" Landscape and Its (Trans)Historical Ideal

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This essay engages with the problematic of landscape painting as an art historical genre in modern and contemporary Lebanese art, particularly in the works of Georges Daoud Corm, Boris Novikoff and Daniele Genadry represented in the Saradar Collection. In terms of the constitution of the landscape as a fine arts genre in Lebanon in the twentieth century, this essay situates its development as a belated response to the ideals of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment humanism and anti-Enlightenment Romanticism. By doing this, the essay considers the ways in which the genre acts as a conduit for topographically grounding the nation in modernity, belatedly, while at the same time articulating the nation form as an ahistorical and natural formation. Further, we trace the afterlife of the genre in the post-medium condition when painting is no longer a privileged medium and landscape is conceived as an empirical site that secures the ideal of the coherent and self-sufficient human(ist) subject.

In art history, the advent of landscape painting as an independent genre is subject to diverging views of nature by the humanists and romantic counter-humanists of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment periods. While humanism and Romanticism establish conflicting conceptualizations of the world and nature, and are traditionally regarded to belong to separate periods (with the advent of humanism being attributed to the Renaissance; and Romanticism to post-Enlightenment), nonetheless they are complementary; Romanticism is inextricable from the Enlightenment's Janus-faced contradictions. For Enlightenment humanist painters and thinkers, the landscape figures as a representation of a *purposeful* nature – of an emphatic force of order, which cultivates human sensibilities and is identified with a concept of nature that is reshaped by, and transformed for, human needs.[1]

1 In Philosophy, the most authoritative are Kant's three Critiques where the problematic of nature, cognition and presentation occupy a central role. The English tradition of the "picturesque" as theorized by William Gilpin (*Observations on several parts of England, particularly the mountains and lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland : relative chiefly to picturesque beauty, made in the year 1772.* 1786) and Uvedale Price (*Essays on the Picturesque, as compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1794) in the late eighteenth century, views the landscape as a source of the cultivation of human sensibilities.

The landscape is thereby conceived as a transparent representation of nature without a supposed mediation and, most importantly, it has a pedagogical role in cultivating and bettering the self, thus contributing to human progress. As opposed to this view, for late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century European Romantics inspired both by Edmund Burke's conception of the sublime and Jean Jacques Rousseau's counter-Enlightenment philosophy, the landscape indexes the limits of the human faculty of cognition, while also registering the capacity of figuration vis-à-vis the seemingly boundless and insurmountable forces of nature. The paradoxical poles of Enlightenment humanism and counter-humanist Romanticism arguably constitute the very contradictions of modernity wherein the landscape acts as a privileged genre that makes visible these contradictions. On the one hand, the landscape acts as a trope of the scientific rendering of nature through observation and serves to enhance human abilities for mastering and making knowable that which is perceived as extra-human. On the other hand, this genre encapsulates a romanticist longing for what is beyond cognition and representation. Hence, the landscape, as an idea and a genre, has a paradoxical promise: it points to the impossibility of capturing nature in its totality, while at the same time representing nature within the bounds of a frame, both literally and in terms of cognitive and sensorial frames.

The genre of landscape painting, in its canonical and academic rendering, marks the gradual withdrawal of the human figure from the frame of representation, as if the human is an outsider looking in. In framing nature, landscape painting is symptomatic of the urge to represent nature—that is to say, to present an ideal image of nature while attributing this ideality to the reality of nature as such. Ideality is either rendered as a peaceful and idyllic cohabitation of natural and cognizing beings, or constructed as a site where the clashing and conflicting forces of nature and the traces of human violence and destruction meet as a sublime and terrifying force. This ideality both conceals and reveals the historical processes of the transformation of nature through human labor, and through the historical mode of representation. It conceals these processes because nature is supposedly rendered transparent to the act of representation, but this transparency is possible because of concrete historical developments that affect both the conceptualization of nature and the mode of its representation.

The genre of landscape painting emerges out of the separation of the city and the countryside as the forces of Industrial Revolution were sweeping Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through the processes of industrialization and urbanization, the bourgeoisie (literal city inhabitants) was emerging as a dominant class. In this case, landscape painting does not simply humanize nature. It does so from the position of the city dweller for whom nature is now associated with the great outdoors set in opposition to the capitalist instrumentalization of leisure and labor time. The heightened division of labor, and the partition of labor and leisure bring about new urban-scapes along labor and class divisions. Moreover, in the context of the construction of nation states in Europe in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, a new "patriotic" sense of the landscape is articulated, one that grounds the community of nations in a universality of belonging. Thus, landscape painting is inextricable from social, political and cultural processes of modernization as well as from the constitution of the national subject in the era of nation states within European modernity. Yet the echoes of inscribing a nation within a universal civilizational discourse, and locating the landscape as a site of the constitution of the nation, can also be found – if only as belated reverberations

and in transformed articulations – in colonial and postcolonial peripheries throughout the twentieth century. Within the peripheries of the metropoles we often witness the reception of European modernity through counter-transference: the colonized subject overidentifies with the colonizer according to the fantasmic image of the latter, which the former has cultivated through the idealization of the colonizer. Lebanon is a good case in point.

The first landscapes appear in Lebanon in the first half of the twentieh century in the works of the so-called pioneers of the Lebanese fine arts, such as Mustapha Farroukh (1901-1957), Omar Onsi (1901-1969), Khalil Saliby (1870-1928), and others. The return to Lebanon of this first generation of painters with professional artistic training from the academies of Paris, Edinburgh and Rome coincided with the sharpening of economic, social, and cultural separation between the city, Beirut, and the country, Mount Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley. The early landscapes of the pioneers of the Lebanese fine arts render nature as an object of study – of observation, representation, and, ultimately, transformation through labor. They provide the material support for grounding the universality of modernity in a particular location, and serve as a means for rooting the ideal of the Lebanese national subject in a specific geography. In this dialectic between universal modernity and its particular actualization, the topographical specificity provided by the landscape is a structural necessity for the very universal claims of modernity, civilization and the ideological construct of the universal human. These claims emerged in the aftermath of social and economic modernization processes in nineteenth-century Lebanon.

The Emirate of Mount Lebanon and Beirut underwent radical transformations instituted by the processes of modernization such as the development of regional and international trade, industrialization and urbanization. Having been established as a semi-autonomous polity of the Ottoman Empire in the late sixteenth century, the Emirate was successively converted into a *Mutasarrifiya* (protectorate) in the mid-nineteenth century, the state of greater Lebanon under the French Mandate in the aftermath of World War I, and an independent nation-state by 1943. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the Emirate, as with other Ottoman provincial territories (or *wilayat*), was run according the feudal *iqta'* system, which gave Emirs and Sheikhs tax-farming rights while still having them report to Ottoman governors (*walis*) in Istanbul. The *iqta'* holders expanded their reach to cover a wider range of the surrounding mountainous areas under the authority of the polity. By this time, the Emirate was distinguished from other Ottoman regions via its non-Muslim majority (mostly Christian sects and Druze). Its conversion from agrarianism to local and international mercantilism was based on the production of silk, exposure to Europe, and the intervention of foreign powers.[2]

While conflicts over land ownership and rent erupted between landlords and peasants, it is only after the mid-nineteenth century that riots across the Empire indicate its foundering as a result of the accelerated processes of modernization, including industrialization, mass production and circulation of commodities (including wage-labor). These processes include the Ottoman *Tanzimat*, the cultural, administrative, and liberal economic reforms (or reorderings), which pushed the empire further into the world market. The Imperial Ottoman Bank was thereafter established in an attempt

2. Traboulsi, Fawwaz. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. London: Pluto Press, 2007. p.3.

to remedy the financial crisis brought about after the Crimean War (1853-1856), and was largely funded by loans from Great Britain. Shortly after its founding, it undertook the financing of public works and railways, among other business, including the Beirut-Damascus line with further extensions toward Aleppo, the Istanbul-Salonica line, the Baghdad Railway, and the Beirut port.[3] The predominantly rural landscape was being transformed into a site of mass production, circulation and distribution of commodities, facilitating the increased mobility of rural populations in newly emerging urban centers: the landscape was now being transformed not only through manual labor, but also through technological means.

After the passing of the Ottoman-European treaty *Règlement Organique* (1860-1864), Mount Lebanon was declared a *Mutasarrifiya*,[4] which relied on Beirut and the world market for cereals and livestock, as well as for its principal industry of sericulture. Sericulture was developed in the service of the silk industry of Lyon and Marseille at the expense of the cultivation of cereals.[5] Fawwaz Traboulsi, for instance, notes that 45% of Mount Lebanon's mountainous surface was dedicated to the cultivation of mulberry trees for the production of silk, and half of its population was working in silk-reeling factories.[6] The cultural aspect of these processes of modernization since the nineteenth century came to be known as the *Nahda*, which manifested in the printing of textual material, including essays, encyclopedias and dictionaries as well as emergence and proliferation of anti-colonial, national and pan-Islamist thought along with searches for alternative myths of origin routed in Christianity and the Phoenician past. It must be asserted, however, that this activity yielded a whole array of contradictory propositions, out of which the ostensible coherence of the nation emerges as an ideological construct.[7] In the early twentieth century, liberal ideas of civilization and cultural progress were being utilized by many intellectuals, predominantly of Christian origin, as a means to counter the domination of the Ottoman Empire, to overcome the belatedness of development and to ground the nation in European, understood as universal, civilizational discourses.

Painter Georges Daoud Corm could, in one sense, be considered as a late representative of the Nahda. Having been academically trained in painting at *L'Ecole Nationale Superieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris*, Georges Corm was heavily invested in developing cultural institutions as an index of progress for the nation. He was directly involved in the establishment of the first cultural educational institutions and museums in Beirut, such as *L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, *L'Ecole Nationale de Musique*, *Musée de la Ville de Beyrouth*, and *Société des Amis de l'Art*, all in the name of the classical ideals of the Renaissance and of Western civilization. These were viewed as combative ammunitions against what Corm saw as the corrupting and relativizing impulses of modernism: one could even call Corm's brand of conservative humanism "militant humanism".

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3 Clay, Christopher. *Gold for the Sultan: Western Bankers and Ottoman Finance 1856-81*. The International Library of Historical Studies. London: I.B. Tauris, 2000. pp.14-15.

4 The *Mutasarrifiya* had expanded from Mount Lebanon to include Zahleh, parts of Hirmil, and the coastal area with the exception of the main cities of Beirut, Tripoli and Sayda.

5 Traboulsi, p. 46.

6 Ibid.

7 Bou Ali, Nadia. "Collecting the Nation: Lexicography and National Pedagogy in *Al-Nahda Al-'arabiyya*." In *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*, edited by John Pedro Schwartz and Sonja Mejcher-Atassi. Farnham: Taylor & Francis, 2012. p.35.

In a pamphlet titled *Essai sur l'art et la civilization de ce temps* that was written in the first half of the 1960s, at the height of the Cold War confrontation of the USA and the USSR, Corm nostalgically calls for the restoration of a former social order as a guarantor of civilization in the face of barbarism. That order is not the feudal past of Mount Lebanon under the Ottoman Empire, but the European Renaissance, which he considers the most fitting model for the young Lebanese nation-state.[8] He calls for a classical humanism, and the promotion of the arts and letters, which can counter what he sees as the two-fold decadence of the modern era: Stalinist Marxism (even in the post-Stalinist context) and American commercialism, which he bemoans as the cause of the downfall of the European empires. He considers the Renaissance – rather than antiquity – as the pinnacle of Western civilization, for it is grounded in a moral code instituted by Christianity. In a programatically humanist vein that relies on the strict separation between the animal and the human, Corm claims that it is spirituality which distinguishes humans: "the Bible and the Gospels never ceased to weigh with all their spirituality upon the revolts of a human animality always quick to employ brutal force or guile to sate its appetites."[9]

For Corm, the accelerated pace of modern life has resulted in the split between reason and the senses, and the privileging of the second (which he equates with instinct) over the first. And it is in this very split that European Enlightenment modernity anchored itself. Psychoanalysis is also to blame as it gives priority to instincts over education. The corrupting forces of modernization are at play in the family, where parents have given up on disciplining their children; in life, where the institution of confession has lost its sway in providing moral consolation; and in the art of today which is no longer produced for the purposes of "meditation and spiritual exaltation,"[10] but rather,

> … pleases itself to awake and excite the animal instincts of man, his sensorial and nervous system, with the call of black tom-toms, the syncopatmoaning and rending howls of the inhabitants of the jungle: men who enter trances, beasts at bay, by way of bluntly explosive monotone shrieks, etc… It has created, to this effect, the magnificently appropriate jazz "battery" to replace the violins, violoncellos, violas, harps, flutes and pianos that composed the well-tempered Orchestra of European humanist civilization.[11]

Quite in tune with the 1930s Nazi equation of fragmented bodily forms in modern painting with a degenerate psyche, Corm compounds militant humanism as a structural and ideological defense for the upstanding human in the name of culture and civilization.

Corm grounds his humanism in the painterly act that elevates the human above base materiality while also humanizing nature. The landscape paintings of his late period need to be approached in this ideological context. In the series of landscapes of the

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8 The first English translation, along with the republication of the original essay in French appears in the catalogue accompanying an exhibition on the artist at the American University of Beirut, titled *Lebanese Painterly Humanism: Georges D. Corm [1896-1971]*. In his introduction to the catalogue, curator Octavian Esanu defines Corm's intellectual stance as "a European humanism firmly anchored in Christian ethics." Esanu, Octavian, ed. "Curatorial Statement." In *Lebanese Painterly Humanism: Georges D. Corm [1896-1971]*. Beirut: AUB Art Gallery, 2013. p.5.

9 Ibid, . p.78.

10 ibid.

11 ibid.

Jeita Grotto that he painted around 1950,[12] he equates the shapes of the stalactite formations of the grotto with the various positions in which the female body rests. (fig.1)

At first sight, several partial objects appear, including what seems to be a vagina in the very center of the painting, and a phallic form behind it to the right. In the bottom right corner of the frame, there are allusions to penetration; a slab of stone enters a cave, and on it, an animal-like figure with a phallic-shaped head (or tail) points in the direction of the central vagina. However, Corm's is not the modernist dismemberment of the body into bits and pieces. Rather his work participates in the economy of the fetish where the partial object actually carries the fantasy of the whole. The vagina in the center also doubles as a wholly intact female body: a head, breasts, a belly button, arms resting by her side, and thighs in a kneeled squat. Sexuality here does not appear as the return of the repressed, but as a natural process of life in line with Corm's "life-affirming humanist position"[13], or what we could call Corm's vitalism. Influenced by nineteenth-century readers of Hegel, Corm treats the human figure as a whole subject whose soul is in turn part of the wholeness of nature. In keeping with his claim that the human subject has two natures, animal and spiritual,[14] he employs Surrealism as a style which can bring out both the divine beauty of nature and humanity as a part of nature: Surrealism is transformed into a natural supra-realism that serves humanistic ends. It is significant that Corm referred to his portraits as landscapes of the soul [*paysages d'âme*]. Considering his anthropomorphized forms, it would not be unfounded to argue that he rendered his landscapes as so-called portraits of the spirit, where spirit corresponds to the organic unity of a totality. Corm disregards the material transformation of the landscape by narrowly selecting a natural site that has been seemingly left untouched by humans, yet he inscribes the human body into the landscape and morphs the landscape as a human body in an act of mutual de-socialization and de-historicization. He does so precisely as Jeita is being circumscribed as a heritage site and a tourist attraction within the nation. The nation in Lebanese "painterly humanism", a designation that curator Octavian Esanu uses to bridge the ideology of humanism and the defense of figurative painting in Corm's work,[15] emerges within the empty looped time between the natural human and humanized nature.

One could consider Corm's landscapes alongside Boris Novikoff's paintings of the same period. In contrast, Novikoff was making visible the manifestations of modernization processes on the landscape throughout the first part of the twentieth century while Corm was concealing these processes (fig.2). Engaging in the aesthetics of realism and the picturesque, Novikoff, like Corm, paints landscapes of ancient sites in Lebanon, which were becoming national tourist attractions. An aristocrat, naval officer and painter, Novikoff fled the Soviet Union in 1925 after having been arrested during the October Revolution, and found refuge in Lebanon where he was granted a governmental position as the head of the technical department of the municipality of Beirut.[16] Novikoff had received artistic training in his youth with the painters Preobrajensky (who

12 C. Corm, Georges. *Georges Daoud Corm*. Beirut: L'imprimerie Catholique, 1981.
13 Esanu p.6.
14 Corm, p.78.
15 Ibid.
16 Very little documentation on Boris Novikoff exists, with the exception of a well-kept archive which was cared for by his daughter Xenia Srouji. This archive has been inaccessible since her death in recent years.

was a professor to the Imperial family) and the Italian academician M.F. Lagorio.[17] Novikoff's landscapes betray a technicist spirit grounded in observation and the accuracy of representation. After all, he had served as an engineer and naval officer in Russia, and his painting was indebted to the tradition of nineteenth-century Russian realism, namely the *peredvizhniki*.[18] Yet his realism is anchored to an ideality found not in the ideal and perfect image of the landscape, but in the ideality of the landscape itself as a material site with its coarseness, roughness and imperfections (fig.3). If this approach to landscape brings Novikoff's paintings closer to the eighteenth-century tradition of the picturesque, his treatment of paint as a material fact that corresponds to the material fact of nature (for instance, the green of cedar trees is meant to be transparently evoked by the most visible and accurate strokes of green paint) is indebted to the mid-nineteenth-century tradition of Russian landscape painting of Isaac Levitan and Ivan Shishkin.

Historically, the term picturesque is an early eighteenth-century word, from the Italian *pitteresco* and the French *pittoresque*, which literally means "like a picture". It came into use during the eighteenth-century Grand Tour in Europe, where it served to describe natural scenes that were witnessed and popularized through the travel guides of William Gilpin, an English educator and country clergyman who was the philosophical father and founder of the picturesque in the aesthetic tradition. The picturesque called on the viewer to observe nature as though it were a painting and to look at paintings as though they were nature. This inverse and reciprocal relationship between painting and nature shifted the emphasis from the academic landscape to the countryside, and paved the way for the importance of empirical observation in the act of painting, and, by extension, for realism.

Comparable to its popularization in Britain due to modernization processes that resulted in an improved road system easing travel to remote parts of the country, the picturesque in Lebanon could not have emerged before the late nineteenth-century railway system that connected the city to parts of the countryside. Novikoff's later paintings, *Landscape of Lake Qaroun* and *Cedars of Lebanon at Dawn* of the 1960s, which are now part of the Saradar Collection, were produced when the railway network that connected Beirut to Damascus was nationalized and reorganized as the Lebanese Railway. It is not coincidental that Novikoff paints sites across the entire country, while not extending beyond its limits. In terms of subject matter, he paints ancient sites, including the ruins of Baalbek, the Byblos port, and the souks of Bezerkane and Zokak Fayoum. While these are sites that underwent transformation, or ceased to be used, Novikoff frames them as indexes of past civilizations to which he ties the legacy of the nation-state. Rather than noting modern activity in the port of Byblos, for example, he frames the medieval port at the center of his painting, deeming it remarkable for its past glory.[19] The historical trajectory of the nation in Novikoff's work is caught between the ideality of the past, the idyll of the countryside and the modernizing forces of tech-

17 Chahine, Lamia. *Cents Ans d'Art Plastique Au Liban 1880-1980 I/One Hundred Years of Plastic Arts in Lebanon 1880-1980 I*. Translated by Harvey Webb. Richard A. Chahine "Chahine Gallery." Beirut, 1982.
18 The *peredvizniki* (literary, the itinerants in Russian) were a group of wandering artists who emerged in 1870s in opposition to the Imperial Arts Academy. Similar to French critical realists such as Gustave Courbet and Jean-François Millet, they defied academism and through realistic means depicted the everyday world of the vast Russian countryside.
19 We were unable to locate the precise date and title of the painting depicting Byblos. There is little information about and access to documentation on Novikoff's life and artistic practice.

nological progress.

Both Corm and Novikoff nostalgically look to the past to ground the nation in a fixed territory. Corm looks to the Renaissance as the highpoint of Western civilization, while Novikoff locates civilizational heritage sites from the past, across Lebanon, as made available via the technological means of industrial progress: the railway system. They each present an ahistorical image of an idealized nature and the ideological construct of the nation form that mask the actual historical transformations of the landscape on the one hand, and the constitution of the nation, on the other hand. While Corm rejects the avant-gardes, he employs Surrealism as a transhistorical style in the service of his militant humanism rooted in Christianity. He anthropomorphizes the landscape to locate the human figure (in its absence) as part of the organic unity of nature as a whole. Novikoff, on the other hand, erases for the most part, the human figure from his landscapes while framing both the human constructions of past civilizations and the picturesque (the frame through which nature is rendered as landscape) as natural. In Corm's and Novikoff's emphatic landscapes nature is rendered as purposeful, and therefore revealing itself as both a force of order, and as a figure of the ideal of measure and harmony, which for him remained unsurpassed since the Renaissance.

Half a century after Corm's and Novikoff's emphatic paintings of the Lebanese countryside and natural formations, contemporary artist Daniele Genadry also paints "Lebanese" landscapes. Today, Genadry's paintings are, however, post-painterly landscapes that index the disintegration of both painting as a privileged medium and the landscape as an art historical genre promising a transparent representation of nature. In Genadry's mostly large-scale paintings, the landscape is rendered as always already mediated by technology, temporality and the human body. These are landscapes-in-process or landscapes-in-time that are viewed from the position of the increasingly mobile and agitated spectator in cars, trains, and other devices of mobility. In her 2014 painting, *The Glow*, the triangulation of technology, optical perception and the body brings about a landscape that decenters the mode of perception while re-centering the body as constitutive of any act of seeing (fig.4).

Genadry works on multi-layered juxtapositions of landscapes in motion. Her initial sketches are photographs before they become drawings, and then paintings. The neon-colored brushstrokes, which emerge with hesitant blurriness from the white glow in the middle of the canvas to become increasingly pronounced and assured towards its edges, articulate the landscape as a zone of liminality where the vision strives to, but cannot quite crystalize, the landscape as an empirically observable site. However, the reversal of the perspectival space, where the edges are more pronounced than the center, only momentarily de-centers the viewer (fig.5). Ultimately, the viewer is immediately re-centered as the central "glow" becomes a projective surface for her body, located before a powerful centrifugal light-force that seemingly suctions the body into the landscape.

As opposed to Corm's and Novikoff's landscapes that provide empirical and material support for the human(ist) and nationalist subject, Genadry's fragmented landscapes-in-time, constituted by a multiplicity of pixels, grains, strokes and dots, prevent idealist identification with "the human" or "the nation" and refuse any coherent notion of the subject. Here, we do not only encounter the post-painterly condition of painting, and the persistence of the genre of landscape painting after its disintegration, but, most

importantly, we are witnessing a broader cultural shift from modernity to the postmodern condition of groundlessness and fragmentation, and from the nation form to the post-national modes of identification in contemporary art. With the end of large-scale modernization projects and the collapse of universal grand narratives, landscape painting is no longer a topographical site that manifests the modernity's (trans)historical ideals of nature and the human. Instead, it's a *picture* whose only promise of reality is that of the reality of representation itself.

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1 | Georges Corm
La grotte de Jeita, 1950
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

2 | Boris Novikoff
Paysage au lac Qaroun, 1963
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

3 | Boris Novikoff
Paysage au Cèdres du Liban, 1963
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

4 | Daniele Genadry
The Glow, 2014
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

5 | Daniele Genadry
The Glow (detail), 2014
courtesy of the Saradar Collection