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Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2994039 since: 2024-10-31T14:00:17Z

(Article begins on next page)

24 November 2024

Scienza in azione

Death by landscape. Lifelines and Slow death as reflection on inhabitation

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Abstract. Mobilizing the figures of Lifelines and Slow death, the paper offers a series of incomplete spatial narratives of different territories in crisis in which inhabiting is questioned. Beirut, peripheral Paris, and northern Lebanon show an Inhabiting on hold: a form of space where reconfigurations of an affective economy of precariousness challenge architecture and urbanism, forging spaces of inconvenience, to describe the pressure of the proximity of many kinds of tension, with positive and negative valences. The paper aims to make visible a series of margins, edges of cities, minorities inhabited by majorities, spatial micro-worlds in which one can see the macroscopic remoteness of institutions and the gigantic power of autonomy, of makeshift solutions, and the effects of structuring territorial inequality in a perpetual state of becoming.

Keywords: inhabitation; lifelines; camps; crisis; territory.

Introduction

"The best reading is the uncertain reading", Robert Gluck reminds us. A reading that disorients us leaves us bewildered. "But what if the intention of the writing is to throw us into confusion, to provoke a state of wonder and to unravel the fundamentals of our experience?", wonders Gluck (2016). What follows is a series of short fragments that form a syllogism, an imprecise map of different territories in crisis in which inhabiting is questioned. It is built on a constellation of connective nodes, alien and disparate territories. 'Connective', here, is not used to suggest sameness or symmetry or even familiarity, but relation, proximity, and undercurrents. Each incomplete fragment comes from earlier research.[1] A slow exercise. Imperfect, because it does not necessarily make sense, at least for a way of doing research that is exclusive, rational, aimed at evaluation, at impact, at demonstration, at the always determined.

Conceptually, two figures can be helpful here.[2] The figure of *Lifeline* (Boano, Bianchetti 2022) is both a prospective and an attunement, a correspondence with an ecological way of conceiving spaces. Lifelines are not a reparative infrastructure,

[1] The different textual fragments provided are updated and modified version of other research materials. Specifically: the Port of Beirut is coming from Samhan, Boano 2023; Port de la Chapelle is adapted from Mastromarino, Boano 2023 and Bar Elias from Dabaj et Al. 2022; Le Camping on the Italian-French Border comes from Mastromarino, Boano 2023a.

[2] Although this text does not stem from the strictly territorialist approach typical of the journal, but from a project I have called "minor" (Boano 2020) which subtends *lifelines* as precarious and ambivalent infrastructures, it seems to me – and I hope – that the imprecise mapping I am presenting can lead to reflections on different territorial policies, from which we can start to address the crisis of territories thought of as spaces of relations and proximity, as not always positive but ambivalent assemblages in the making.

they are a space for a "subjectivity that is always subjectivity-in-brokenness, if brokenness means a subjectivity that is not just shaped but constituted by the external world's force" (*ibid.*, 10). Lifelines are lines nesting and gathering where some form of protection is in place: infrastructures, membranes, ambient, ecologies and spaces in which life and death, health and suffering, exile and capture, proximity and distance, solidarity and abandonment, freedom and dependence are constantly at stake. Lifelines are those spaces where the world and life intertwine, mingle, twist in a constant resistance – awkward and fragile – to the mechanisms of capture, exploitation, and creation of social and environmental precariousness.

The other is the figure of *Slow death*, a concept introduced by Lauren Berlant (2007) as "the physical wearing out of a population", a condition that it "is simultaneously an extreme and in a zone of ordinariness, where life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable" (*ibid.*, 754) that might help to give some sense to the fragments below. In such attritions we must imagine a future of coexistence in and with "the inconvenience of other people" as Berlant (2022) suggests. For her, such inconvenience is the affective sense of the familiar friction between being in relation with and continuously adapting to others. The central element for it is to acknowledge each one's implication in the pressures of coexistence. This condition suggests the importance of the "evidence that no one was ever sovereign, just mostly operating according to some imaginable, often distorted image of their power over things, actions, people and causality" (*ibid.*, 3). The inconvenience of other people became a pragmatic political topic. It is about navigating and generating change from within the long broken and fractious middle of life.

1. Port of Beirut and its surrounding, Beirut, Lebanon

On 4 August 2020 at around 6:00 pm, two large explosions rocked the Port of Beirut and ripped through most of the city leaving 191 people killed, more than 6,000 injured, and over 300,000 Beiruti residents displaced. Images of wounded people were pouring, memories were looping, and ambulance sirens were shattering the vacuum of port destruction. Videos started circulating on social media depicting people drenched in blood, hospitals destroyed, trees uprooted, massive cranes crumpled, historical silos shattered, and residential buildings collapsed. At that moment, time froze, the heart of Beirut stopped, and the city was declared dead. The explosion impacted the neighbourhoods of Achrafieh and Karantina: everything was demolished, broken, destruction all over the buildings, the streets, people injured, holding their children, and running no one knows where. "That's where we understood that it's not just our building; it's the whole world around us", said Katia. Such events and their ongoing repercussions unfold in the context of a pandemic, a dysfunctional political vacuum, and an accelerated financial collapse. Lebanese people appear to have collectively normalized a unique way of life where living is "always living with the idea of danger", said Mirna.

Not a new composition, but a subtraction; an escape from the stable possession of the urban project language with its conventions and habits, canons and methods, gods and types, obsessions and devices, towards something new, unprecedented, made possible when the author, the writer, the planner give up their authority, a firm grip on what they enunciate. Maybe, the counter-exodus theorised by Magnaghi (2013) and the fugitive spaces I found are pointing to the same goal, a renewed project of autonomous inhabitation.

Life and death. Traumatized, alienated and dominated by the heavy burdens of crises, Lebanese people have incessantly been negotiating the meaning of their individual and collective life through a palimpsest of everyday practices, trajectories and spatial representations intertwined with unique coping strategies. Cyclic, repetitive and only growing in intensity, the memories of the war figure and refigure in the minds of the Lebanese and in the spaces of their city. Queues, repeated visits and trajectories between 'familiar' and 'other' areas are spatial forms and movements that reinvigorate the war's own. "We are still searching for the meaning of life amidst the unhealed traumas and recurrent deceptions. Our life is just a living it is just a matter of life priorities", said Ahmad.

Figure 1. Lebanon, Beirut, port explosion site. Photo by the author, 2023.

What was emerging is an exhausted territory, predated by the absence of the public, brutalised by the fragility of the common and vandalised by the preclusion of a thinkable and imaginable future. Lebanon is living in a catastrophic present. Catastrophe is not a violent event that happens once and for all, that then goes away after having accomplished its gruesome work of leaving a world of ruins, to be fixed, restored and recomposed with the limited resources of its people. A never-ending process, which accumulates and sediments, and that erodes the vitalist and progressive message of those who are working to advocate reclaiming publicness, justice, and equity.

2. Porte de la Chapelle, Paris, France

A neighbourhood where conflicts between bodies and spaces shaped by the neoliberal city, as well as the transits and the production of new identities, have radically transformed the city of passages into a territory in which spatial and social borders have cancelled possible conditions of porosity. The Lycée Jean-Quarré, occupied on 31 July 2015 by the collective *La Chapelle en lutte*, hosted initially about 150 people; then, following an initial tolerance by the municipality, the squat was open to all those who needed it and the number of people welcomed grew rapidly.

The space was then divided by nationality, each occupying a different floor of the old high school, whilst a large hall was transformed into a common kitchen and canteen. In October 2015 the building was evicted, with 1,400 people moved to reception centres or dispersed. Since then, the neighbourhood of Porte de la Chapelle has become a territory shaped by waves of several creation and destruction of informal camps – so Porte de la Chapelle has become an infrastructure. It is a place of different levels, passages and surfaces which accordingly generate a series of liminalities and wastelands that remain unsolved in the precise and calculated system of the city. This place falls into crisis when people are forced to inhabit it, deconstructing its primary function as a space of transit and reassembling its legacies of shelter and support – i.e. of the several associations that acts in this liminal area of the city. The opaque presence of migrant bodies in the urban space is both a result and the origin of displacement, which generates a patchwork of fragmented and scattered settlements that cannot be analysed in detail and separately.

3. Bar Elias. A small town along the Beirut-Damascus highway, northern Lebanon

Mostafa is a Palestinian man in his 50s who lives in the Berbayta neighbourhood of Bar Elias since 1974. With the growing of his family the house expanded to become a three-storey building. He and his family are living on the first floor, his sister on the ground floor and his brother with his family on the second floor. Mostafa and his brother built an extended part of the second floor in 2017 with two apartments for their children. In Mostafa's apartments more than eight people share the kitchen and bathroom; four Syrian households were renting through a NGO shelter program. Fahim lives in the Makkawi neighbourhood. He transformed his previous horse stable into housing units: "I added a small bathroom, a kitchen, I painted it, installed tiles, and fixed the ceiling, I even decorated it". He is renting for 150,000 LBP per month to three Syrian households who pay their electricity and water bills separately. Each housing unit is no more than 24 sqm, includes a living room/bedroom space, a small kitchen and bathroom. Families of 5 people live there since 2018. Saleem's house is in Al-Nahreya neighbourhood, he is a Lebanese man in his 70s, born and raised in Bar Elias. He owns two plots of lands on which there is a two-storey house with a garden where he lives with his and his son's family. It also has another small building with some commercial activity on the ground floor while upstairs it is still unfinished, but he now rents it to 5 families for 200,000 LBP per month. Saleem also has a carpenter's shop for his son, an old cow farm converted into a series of renting out units, and an agricultural field (growing plums) and another land rented off to an ITS (Informal Tented Settlement) this one includes 60 tents, each tent worth 100,000 LBP per month).

With the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, displaced Syrians settled in Tell Serhoun. There ITSs started to form incrementally, with the protracted nature of the refugee crisis, from two ITSs in 2012 with no more than 20 tents, to 6 ITSs with around 450 tents in early 2020. Displaced people and their hosts in Bar Elias have started a series of micro-practices of doing, undoing, renting, partitioning, subdividing, roofing and occupying space that allow them to negotiate their presence in the city, at the same time producing housing and producing the city itself. The spatial entanglements between different forms of spatial arrangements, incremental aesthetics and the rent transactions which are shaping life in Bar Elias have created modes and mechanisms of coping with space and its urban surroundings that allow us to understand its history and relations as a process of inhabitation.

Bar Elias' displaced urbanism is created by multiple actors that constantly make it liveable. The *shawish* is a mediator, a broker, and a constructor. A figure that ensures the functioning of such a place and helps to make it possible and liveable. Even in the direst situations, people engage in place-making activities forging relations, enhance their connectedness, get attached to a place, make a home to sustain life. Emplacement, in other words, is not opposite but rather constitutive of displacement. A form of urbanism made of acts that create friction within an existing system of oppression and opportunities. Few kilometres north-east of Bar Elias, Tell Serhoun is immersed in agricultural fields. In 2005, the Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon and it was transformed in settlement of Syrian farm workers who set up tents seasonally as they migrate following work opportunities. With the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, displaced Syrians started to move to Tell Serhoun and settle there. ITSs started to form incrementally, with the protracted nature of the crisis, from 2 in 2012 with no more than 20 tents, to 6 with around 450 tents in early 2020. Locals from Bar Elias and its neighbouring towns started building up Tell Serhoun, the number of permanent buildings doubled post 2011, predominantly for housing purposes and renting to Syrian refugees. A mosque and various shops were set up to serve the needs of the inhabitants (barber, groceries, poultry, cell phone shop and storage units).

Figure 2. Lebanon, Bar Elias, Tell Serhoun, informal tented settlement. Photo by the author, 2023.

4. Le Camping, Vallée de la Roya, Italy-France border

The French-Italian border is a linear territory approximately 515 km long going from Chamonix-Mont-Blanc in France and Courmayeur in Italy all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, separating Menton and Ventimiglia. It is itself a border on the move, both in its conflictual territorial configuration and geography of displacement. An unstable and fluid territory. Along it, various migratory hubs are visible and recognizable, often coinciding with the main points of transnational mobility and connections: highways, routes, and train stations as well as – due to the rural nature of the territory – mountain pathways and often dangerous trails along the coast.

The borderscape here is dissolved in a series of patterns within and across cities and rural areas: in virtual hotspots, undefined passages, and transit hubs. It is constantly re-questioned and re-configured through the perception of people in transit, law enforcement and networks of solidarity. Specifically, the 2016 marked the beginning of an extraordinary control and militarisation of the Vallée de la Roya with more than 32,285 pushbacks. The permanent and non-permanent controls of roads and stations create newly detached and diffuse spaces of differential transit but, at the same time, also multiple forms of solidarity infrastructure and spatial strategies to resist harassment and controls of police and state powers. Somehow grounded in the rural radicalism, echoing the radical past of the neorural immigration that settled in the territory from the 70s, the current form of solidarity recognizes that forced migration, extractive practices and marginalization are linked to capitalist tactics of global/local governance, contributing to spatial dynamics of dispossession and displacement that are far from unique, new, or over. An important example of hospitality and support for the people in transit in the Vallée de la Roya is the farm of Cedric Herrou, an organic farmer settled in Breil-sur-Roya. Preoccupied with the situation in Ventimiglia and the increase of people transiting through the valley, Cedric started collaborating with the association Roya Citoyenne, particularly involved in providing basic assistance and food to people in transit at the border and on the coast. Like many other people in several villages, Herrou decided soon to host people at his place, equipping the fields with tents and roulettes. Over time, various wooden constructions have been built by the farmer, as well as by volunteers and people in transit, aimed at providing decent shelter and essential facilities to anyone. Dry toilets, showers, and a common area have been installed here through the years. In a very short time, the site started to represent a point of reference for those wishing to help people in transit in the valley; volunteers started bringing people found walking on the street or in situations of precarity to Herrou's spaces. The site was soon labelled "Le Camping" or "Le Camp". It was completely self-sufficient and managed by volunteers living in the valley or those coming from neighbouring territories, as well as the people welcomed who actively took part in the self-management of the shelter.

Figure 3. France, Vallée de la Roya, view over Tende. Photo by S. Mastromarino, 2022.

Various associations started to assist, providing legal aid, French language courses, drawing and theatre ateliers, and medical aid to the vulnerable people, managed by Médecins du Monde. Around 2.500 persons were hosted in the farm since 2015, with peaks of arrivals especially in the summer of 2017. The story of "Le Camp" is complex and large (Mastromarino, Boano 2023b) but it shows the territory and its transient population continually at work to invent a life that practice an excess of inhabitability, thus shaping a politics of inhabitation. The border space is the epistemic element generating the multiple and subjective gazes through which the territory can be analysed. It becomes an interactive architecture that porously "constructs and deconstructs itself depending on the relationship that each individual has with the state", thus creating "a regulating device that mediates between birth and nationhood" (Hilal, Petti 2019, 74). The border here generates a series of spaces on the edge that continuously adapt, morph and modify operating a differential inclusion that enable dynamics of holding of "*indésirables*" (Agier 2008). Le Camping, like many other informal shelters at the border, is activated by porous and interconnected solidarity and is holding bodies and practices they generated. Solidarity spaces become infrastructures, through a network of houses, people, and actions that constantly dismantle the political division of the border and silently enable prohibited transnational passages through Europe. Collective resistances, sedimented practices in the territory are strengthening a crucial mutual relationship with it, unfolding knowledge of the site and reproducing know-how to tackle diverse conflicts and situations of crisis.

5. An impossibility of composition in a constant ambiguity

Perhaps, the above fragments tell a story of practices that signals the "impossibility of planning" (Tsing 2021, 401), that exhibit "latent commons" (*ibid.*, 204), entanglements that explode categories and distort identities because they are capable of subverting the interpretive categories we have (space, relationship, failure, etc.). An impossibility of composition around those zones of contact that build places, make the world, capture but at the same time sustain, allow many ways to exist without anyone taking over, draw uncomfortable but familiar presences, trace forms of exile and resistance almost leaning on what exists, what one would like to exist. It allows a glimpse on the possibility of a new inhabitation by destabilising the affective cartographies of the exception and leaving lines of escape, contamination, failure. *Lifelines* to look at the project of making space in its struggles between the consoling tones of care and the "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) of building, maintaining, and repairing living spaces by destabilising the affective cartographies in a constant ambiguity between control and abandonment, entanglement and separation, immunity and exposure.

Beirut, Bar Elias, Paris seem to tell a story of those practices that spatialize life without the promise of stability (Tsing 2021, 24), where inhabiting is weaving relationships, knotting, taking distance. Other worlds, "fragile, imperfect, and far from idyllic, but undoubtedly other – still live" (Consigliere 2014, 114) as well as a series of ongoing experimentations, an imprecise effort in generative feeling, an ongoing and unfinished art of noticing and learning (*ibid.*). A series of possible alliances with lost, suppressed, marginalized realities, fantastical, incomprehensible, and implausible, that shape "unhinged" territories (Thomas, Masco 2023), always "in touch with other worlds underway and yet to be made" (Savransky 2021, 2).

It seems that, despite the various spatial taxonomies and nomenclature, such spaces still resist to classification and normalization. Spaces *that hold*. 'Hold' in English means to take something in hand or in arms or to stop someone in a place; but, especially when used in the gerund – as *holding* – it also means to sustain, to support. A space that can be concurrently associated to a place of care and a point of non-return (Sharpe 2016). A membrane that allows suspension. Spaces of transition, places of rest, of pause to catch one's breath (Aradau, Tazzioli 2020). Separated but interconnected. Manifolds set of spaces where "living is not (only) a question of survival but a process of continuous adaptation between protection and freedom, care and control; and this adaptation is a struggle, it is finding ways to escape, degrees of freedom; a struggle to transform the existing by coming to terms with vulnerabilities" (Boano 2022, 10). Here inhabitation goes beyond promoting people's own autonomy or enabling coexistence. *Inhabiting on hold* is a form of space where the reconfiguration of an affective economy of precariousness is questioning architecture and urbanism, as a way of being on and in the Earth, "on one's way of being, taking care of this very being, and, precisely for this reason, leaning towards the other, open to something else, to the possibility of a not yet" (Petrosino 2019, 12). Spaces of inconvenience. Here inconvenience describes the pressure of the proximity of many kinds of tension, with positive and negative valences. As Berlant suggest us is the affective sense of the familiar friction of being in relation. At a minimum, inconvenience is the force that makes one shift a little while processing the world. The important thing is that we are inescapably in relation with other beings and the world and are continuously adjusting to them. Inconvenience describes a feeling state that registers one's implication in the pressures of coexistence.

With such fragments, I hoped to have made visible a series of margins, edges of cities, minorities inhabited by majorities, spatial micro-worlds in which one can see the macroscopic remoteness of institutions and the gigantic power of autonomy, effects of structuring territorial inequality in a perpetual becoming. Is not a romantic call for a survivial in decline but a "the return to the terrotory […], a necessary and urgent reconstruction, in every place on Earth, of the material bases and social relations necessary to produce […] renewed co-evolutionary relations" (Magnaghi 2013, 52). Such return is not a nostalgic reappropriation but a fragile and imperfect reclaim of a present and a possible future. Each fragments above, somehow, allows in its own way to show the work of migration and inhabitation in space. It shows the laborious effort connected with mobile lifes, nesting and mending spaces and local projects in a constant "uprootings/regroundings […] beyond oppositions such as stasis versus transformation, or presence versus absence" (Ahmed et Al. 2003, 1-2).

We are all left with a broken world, where there is no way back to integrity. Maybe, the only choice is learning to live with fragments, fixing holes, and restoring functions, in an attempt to preserve some form of life.

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