

Un accident by the Mediterranean

Relli De Vries

East of the Mediterranean. Latitude 32

I will present today the unique role of the Mediterranean in the spatial perception of Israel. This role is exposed in particular in the description of what is happening along its shores, namely: the geopolitical reaction to the presence of the sea on Israel's west. My argument is twofold. First, accidents take place close to sea, at Israel's coastal plain. Secondly, these accidents allow an examination of the relationships between the country's borders on the one hand, and the forces operating within it on the other.

For sometime now I have been working on a project titled 'East of the Mediterranean', in which I separate myself from the sea in order to move eastward. The project examines what happened near, on the shore, and it is a starting point towards reacting to the power and weakness of the sea by.

I Look at a place wide and deep, between the mountain and the Mediterranean, between east and west between the interior and the exterior, where geological, economic, and political forces form the space.

I focus on the crucial events in the lives of the inhabitants, and on the political forces that impact their space. I examine the way their life merges with the specific axes of time and space.

Space and time are the conventional tools we look at the world. I read space and time with the help of the grid of the coordinate. I use this tool to try to make order; to understand the way the state organizes its space. I do so by considering its geological components, its time, and its struggle in space and during time.

In the Israel-Palestine space the longitude is stretched as a skeletal thread along the state. The paralleling coastal line of the Mediterranean overlaps the country's western border. This is a long and narrow country, and so are its landscape templates. In this way the country is compressed with a latitude of 'shrunk - waists' and tectonic elevations of mountains and with alluvial plains in between.

Israel refuses to define its borders, and expands illegally and aggressively to the east, but also to the west. In this way the coastal line of the Mediterranean, its "natural" border so to speak, mostly overlaps the country's western line.

The longitudinal orientation is north-south. In the west the exterior is the sea, and the interior in the east is the enemy. The latitude and its geological cross-section in particular, is a line 'against'. It is contrary to the physical and experiential-conceptual structure of the space. As such it enables therefore the examination of the space in a different way.

This cross-section in the Mediterranean turns eastward to the orient and inside into the land. It travels through the Arab village of Jisr-az-Zarka, and through the quarried tunnel in the cliffs of the Roman calcareous sand-stone quarry, on which the village was built. The latitudinal cross-section passes through the calcareous sand-stones that were used by the Romans to build the aqueduct. The attitude then stretches eastward into the heart of the Kabarah plain which was once all flooded with swamps.

Further east this latitude leads me to Jenin. And also to Umm El Fahem, whose borders and identity are now hotly debated – in a state that defines itself a Jewish state, and in which a fifth of its population is Arab.

The east side extends into the land, where there are many Arab states perceived by Israel as hostile. For this reason there is practically no continuous movement inside.

The exterior is the sea and the interior is the blocked land. Similar to other places the Mediterranean coast has become a very lucrative area. At the same time it does not preserve its ecological qualities, and sewage water keeps on reaching the sea. To live by the coast and see the sea is the ultimate dream for those craving for leisure, beauty and luxury.

Similar to other places the Mediterranean was once covered by the Tethys Sea. Standing at the feet of Mount Carmel you actually see a riff.

In some of my projects I express the concept of flooding and withdrawal. The historical events that have taken place in Palestine - in particular the 1948 war - were an earthquake that shaped the landscape. These events also shape the landscapes I saw throughout my childhood, and which continue to reverberate.

Reading the surface can bring forth the question of the layer that lies below.

The modernist coastal road, the first autostrade built in Israel to create a fast connection between south and north, is located on the longitude. When the latitude, on which Jisr Az-Zarka is located, meets the longitude, a clash happens. As a result the political and the cultural forces are taken apart, and the causes of the clash are clarified.

The inhabitants of Jisr Az-Zarka lived in the Kabbara swamp area for 400 years. They were Bedouin tribes. They knew how to live on water. They earned their living by weaving baskets and breeding buffalos.

The swamp, similar to many other places in the world, served as a refuge for the landless. They came to the place over the years from close by; but also from far away, from the Hawran, Egypt, Trans-Jordan and Turkey. The Kabbarah Plain is part of the drainage basin of the Mediterranean.

This plain is rich in water springs and high ground water. The streams coalesce together, and bend westward into the sea. At the heart of the plain is the Roman aqueduct, which was part of the water system of neighboring Caesarea. Part of the aqueduct is a tunnel in the belly of Jisr.

The elongated geomorphologic strips can well be seen also on the surface. This is one of the wettest regions on the coastal plain and many water-sources are present here. It is assumed that also the stratum of the Tethys Sea is locked at the depth of the cross-section.

In 1923 the inhabitants of the swamp experienced an unexpected change. As part of the Zionist project of reclaiming swamps, the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association (PICA) proposed the inhabitants to evacuate the swamp. In return there were given privately owned lands – the remains of the Roman quarry on the sandstone hill. PICA employed them in the reclamation of the swamp because of their alleged resistance to malaria mosquitoes, and as a replacement of the Jews who got Malaria. Turning from swamp inhabitants into land owners was a dramatic change. They were also employed now as laborers in the fields of the Jewish plantations nearby.

They survived the 1948 war and the fate of so many Arabs - who turned into refugees and remain so up to this day. There are different versions to why this was so. One is that the employers in the neighboring plantations wanted to keep them as workers. During the war many refugees reached Jisr from Caesarea, Tantura, Hadera, Akko, and Arab settlements nearby.

In the early 1970s the modernist coastal road was built partly by confiscating land from Jisr. In that way the road became the wall-border between Jisr and the state.

On the north, parallel to the development of the river reserve, fences were built around the reserve, and the fish pools of the neighboring Kibbutz Maagan Michael. The land between the village and the beach was declared a reserve, partly a national park. That meant that the area belongs to the state, and the inhabitants cannot use it. Their linkage to the sea is blocked to them by law. In 2003 another 8 meters high fence was built on the south of the village, between the inhabitants and Caesarea - the richest villas area in the country. The argument is that the music which is played in wedding festivities disturbs the inhabitants of Caesarea. The separation-wall is made of layers of huge quantities of red loam, which was spread on the dunes.

Jisr Az-Zarka is imprisoned by all the possible known techniques and the main entry is under the by-passing road and is too narrow for buses to enter. The village's 13,000 inhabitants organize their own transportation to the rest of the country. The way they have to make every day takes hours, more than double the time it takes any other citizen. The people of the village call it a Ghetto. The settlement has become a site for fiction films on life in Gaza, and is considered one of the poorest and backward villages in Israel.

The coastal line has the highest value and the state desires it. Much effort is invested in the isolation and suppression of the inhabitants. It is the ongoing story of the turning of reclamation workers of the swamp into isolated foreign workers.

Chain accidents happen

on latitude 32 and longitude 34,

32 meters above sea level.

Man-made tectonics causes eruptions and inversions.

The accident in space and time

Space and time represent the events of the accident. The space is represented by the latitude life-line of the inhabitants who moved from the swamps to the village. Time is represented by the longitude travel along the rocks on the fast road. The fast road that serves the people, that anyway are not going to enter Jisr, and shapes the homeland landscape according to the laws of speed, efficiency, and state time. This time of the state passes by Jisr Az-Zarqa, and the village remains entrapped behind in another time. In this event different times on the same space intersect, collapse.

The accident of historical legacy

The fast road is formally justified as an economic saving, and was inspired by the mythological Roman sea-road. Paradoxically, while the coastal road expropriates land from the

village, it also lies on the Roman aqueduct and blocks the entry of the water tunnel that leads into the village under the houses of the inhabitants. In this chain accident, in order to block entry to the settlement the adored Roman aqueduct is destroyed.

The accident of the ownership of the lands

The people of Jisr Az-Zarqa are land owners. The drying of the swamp was only partially successful. Their rights on this expensive land are practically an accident in the space of the ideology of the state. As one resident told me "for them we are stuck here."

The real and most terrible accidents

Villagers are killed trying to cross the road that passes by them and never reaches them, separates them, and does not allow them proper entry, even under the village. Dozens are killed - children running after a lost football, workers trying to save time.

The crash of time

In my work 'Orientatzia' the latitudinal cross-section stretching from the Mediterranean to the Carmel Mount turned into an amphibian entity 'extracted' from the sea, built in one unit of layers of the sea and the land.

As I express my work as an artist I made an installation. In that way the cross section became an entity.

Installation: Orientatzia

Orientatzia is an entity of the between and betwixt,

'Orientatzia' offers a reading of a landscape and a social change. It is a reading of a topographic inversion of a hidden geology that aspires for its own externalization. It is a reading for making present what has already been destroyed, but has not vanished. Layers of repressed history are engraved and marked afresh.

I described here a point of breaking, in the language of navigation and cartography usually used for knowledge on a place, on the behavior of plants and its geological layers.

Jisr is used to make films on Gaza, partly because of its landscape and proximity to the sea. The same sea is also the territorial space where the disaster of the flotilla that sailed from Turkey to Gaza happened. The morning after that horrible night I stood with a group of people in front of the sea, to protest, and to call, for the first time in my life, in the direction of the water. The grouping and the walking - fully dressed on the water-line close to the boats - filled me with many thoughts and images of historical events, of refugees, of occupation, of beginnings and transformations.