

ICE

In the heart of the glaciers

Jean-François DELHOM

Three extracts taken from the book (Éditions Favre, 2025),
translated into English by Lisa Richardson

Introduction

Requiem for glaciers: I could have given my book this title, a catchy one if you believe that drama sells books. But the melting of the ice caps is not the theme of this work, nor a pretext for it, nor is it the urgency of the situation, or at least only in a roundabout way. First and foremost, my book can more easily be compared to what is known in literature as an exercise in admiration. It is not a eulogy, even though it is already an archive, as most of the caves I have photographed have disappeared or have been transformed beyond recognition; they are ephemeral by nature. If I said “flower”, you wouldn’t immediately think of the bud, nor the wilted plant, but rather the explosion of colour when the flower blooms. Of course, there will still be flowers in fifty years whilst the majority of our glaciers will have disappeared. You can’t help but feel overcome with sadness. And anger, when you realise that our greenhouse gases are mainly responsible for this demise, whatever the climate deniers might say. I am not dismissing anger and sadness, they are the lifeblood of my texts. But for my images, I have chosen to be on the side of things.

Because I refuse to follow the call of contemporary art curators in vilifying beauty, this great lamentation that seems to have reached a consensus in the world of reporting, in the name of a disenchantment they seem to cherish as if it were a question of lucidity. Endlessly brooding over the negative has become a simulacrum for appeasing their conscience whilst a disinterested love of beauty is made out to be insipid. Whether they are cynics, or on the contrary, militants, they worship the ugliness, banality and pain in the world, filling their every waking thought, as if it were “reality”. And yet, the positive aspect is none the less real than the negative and it is just as worthy of our attention. And it is this positive aspect that contemplative types attempt to honour with their vigilance.

A contemplative attitude can be seen as one of the most subversive of our time. Subversive and therefore misunderstood, going against the tide of dominant ideologies that demand meaning, function, productivity, performance *in all things*. Meaning, function, productivity, performance, watchwords that reduce living things to their productive value. No regard for living beings and a disdain for alterity.

Moreover, it is precisely because *homo æconomicus* is incapable of admiring that he/she is in the throes of destroying our planet. We are an exploitative civilisation in which, to justify their actions, predators repeatedly play on a semantic shift of the verb exploit, claiming to be productive whilst instead of enriching, they enslave us with their constant pillaging.

The contemplative type counters the frenetic euphoria of dominators by resisting, not the form of resistance born out of passivity, but out of respect for what is being saved. The future – highly compromised by our current ecological crisis and attacked from all sides by a greedy and devastating self-regard – will depend less on our power than our own thoughtfulness.

Some nature lovers want us to protect nature by keeping it a secret. “You’re going to attract a crowd with your publications” these amateurs of exclusivity exclaim. I might almost agree with them. I don’t really like crowds either – nor privilege. How to decide? If truth be told, time has already decided. If you go to the zones I have photographed, you’ll see nothing more than scree, the glaciers have retreated. No more caves, not a trace. I could give you the GPS co-ordinates for most of the cave entrances for you to lay flowers on the tombs of glaciers that have gone forever. If people want to reproach me for encouraging tourism, then they should expect nothing more than mortuary tourism.

My book is not a tourist guide. Whilst it could be classed as “poetic reporting” the meaning behind this formulation still needs clarifying as it is far from evident. It is not enough for me to just photograph something admirable, I want to stimulate people’s capacity for admiring. Consumption involves worshipping the object; contemplation involves raising awareness of the subject. If we do not want our glaciers to be tossed aside like consumables, then we shouldn’t tick them off our list like some people tick off Mont Blanc, just another ostentatious notch on a bucket list. They deserve to be honoured. Which is why I am not drawn to summits and belvederes. I am not interested in panoramas, a panoptic situation that provides the same viewpoint for everyone who occupies this central position, occasionally standardised by an orientation table, or marked by the “protective” symbol of a flag or cross.

I am interested in our aptitude to gaze, which sometimes requires us to move closer or sometimes to take a step back, rarely for us to dominate. I like to be able to double back, to change plans. My destination is not a goal but a pretext. I do not need to reach my target for I have no target. I am someone who changes course, I'm someone who lingers.

Why Switzerland? (All of the photos in this book were taken in Switzerland.) In 2015, I decided to boycott flying for ecological reasons (a resolution I have managed to honour up until now, barring a trip to Canada in November 2025). Hence, I set myself the challenge of finding emotion closer to home, in my own country. No patriotism in this approach. As a citizen of the world, my homeland is not the geographical or identitarian one that has a tendency to excite nationalists. For me, a homeland simply means a work of art, a library, a network of shared ideas, a political family, escaping vulgarity and noise, subverting predatory powers, it's being in the company of the angered and the righteous, it's the love of truth, it's poetry, it's witticism, it's children's laughter... This homeland only excludes those who disdain it.

But perhaps it would be going too far to talk about homelands, the contemplative type is often more of a loner who goes their own way, who takes no orders, holds no title deeds, and leaves nothing behind in the lands they travel than their odour, quickly carried away on the wind.

* * *

The melting of the glaciers: a warning, an exhortation!

I travel to glaciers to be filled with wonder. I would love for that to be the end of it, the simple joy of time standing still, grounding us firmly in the present. I have deposited this present in my images, I have safeguarded the memory, the die is cast, homage has been paid.

That being said, now is the time to face up to the disturbing news I would have much preferred to do without: our glaciers are melting, they are retreating, liquifying, evaporating, and ultimately disappearing one after the other. We are losing their ecosystemic capacity for storing water. We are also losing their gracefulness, their strangeness. The landscape is becoming impoverished, the white and blue hues have taken a leave of absence, nature has gone into mourning.

The alarm bell sounded a long time ago now, the bad news is slowly spreading, testimonies abound, scientific data is all pointing to the same conclusion.¹

The theme is so omnipresent that it's beginning to sound like the same old tiresome refrain. So why keep playing the same old record? Because it is crucial information, it needs to be clarified and put into perspective.

Current global warming is not a cyclic phenomenon it's an imbalance. The astronomer Milutin Milanković identified three astronomical parameters to explain alternating glacial and interglacial periods. These parameters are the earth's axial tilt, the earth's eccentricity and the precession of the equinoxes. I won't dwell on this as anyone who is interested will find a wealth of complementary explanations on the internet. Climate sceptics are keen to accept this explanation so as to link current global warming to a cyclic phenomenon. This allows them to ignore the devastation caused by our planetary production of greenhouse gases. We can continue producing gases, it's fine, global warming is completely "natural": that's what they want us to believe. And yet, they forget to point out that Milanković's parameters deviated from this model due to a nonastronomical factor, a deviation backed up by growing and strengthening scientific proof across thousands of studies – yes, thousands.

1. Between 2000 and 2025, the Swiss glaciers lost 40% of their volume. More than 500 glaciers have already disappeared in Switzerland since 1850. (<https://www.glamos.ch>)

It should be noted that Switzerland, known as the "water tower of Europe" for its glaciers and rivers, supplies the continent's four main basins which provide water for 150 million people. On a planetary level, since 2000, "every year, the melting of the glaciers is the equivalent of the worldwide population's water consumption for 30 years". (World Glacier Monitoring Service, 2/2025)

The Pizol Glacier: gone!

The Corvatsch Glacier: gone!

The Schwarbachfirn Glacier: gone!...

Those mainly responsible for climate do not cash out, they cash in.

If our politician-investors' communication consultants prefer to talk about global warming or climate change rather than climate imbalance, it's because they want to deny the gravity of the situation with all their might and pursue the logic of "business as usual" which, at a time of economic liberalism and further still neoliberalism, has destabilised the economy of the human society it was intended to serve.²

But there is worse still. Our productionist-consumerist lifestyle, founded on extractivism and polluting activities, is equally responsible for the collapse of biodiversity, to the point that scientists are talking about a sixth mass extinction of life on earth. Unless ecological awareness brings about a real economic revolution, we are going to keep on destroying the planet until we are submerged by catastrophes, caught in the cogs of what we call climate change feedbacks. By that time, it will be far too late to avoid the worst, at least as far as our generation is concerned. Our planet is steaming, divided between desertic plains and depopulated oceans, and it will become so inhospitable for the human species that we can predict a quadruple collapse: economic, environmental, social and moral – if not the complete extinction of humanity. And these are not the predictions of enlightened sectarians but ones that are backed up by the scientific community whose predictive models have been borne out over the last fifty years.

In the meantime, we have the unfortunate privilege of witnessing the rapid melting of our glaciers.

No need to go to the North Pole or to Greenland, the damage can already be felt closer to home. A slow death up there in the mountains, compared to the rapid demise of our phytoplankton, coral, marine life as well as terrestrial life, our phreatic tables, the humus on our ravaged lands, insects, birds, mammals, starving humans or migrants... But this is only the beginning.

I doubt if we can make those in power fully aware of their excessive folly (*hybris*) in time, because as macroparasites, they have always led their economic systems with the same conviction, which, since the dawning of *Homo sapiens*, have caused havoc by depleting the very thing that ensures our survival.³ What I am convinced of however, is that even though we appear

2. Cf. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 1944.

3. Cf. Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind*, Vintage Publishing, 2015. Although this captivating overview is not irreproachable (are any of them?), it draws

doomed to failure, we can stop it from getting any worse. I refuse to accept defeat. I refuse it, not through hope but through strategy. In this respect, I have moved away from collapsology theories and closer towards Jean-Pierre Dupuy's point of view and his philosophy of action.⁴ The temporal relationship between the present and the future is a relationship of reciprocal influences in regards to what Dupuy calls "the time for making plans". In this dynamic, our prophecies are inflected, becoming either "self-invalidating prophecies" when our rebellious reactions fight against the prediction, or "self-realising prophecies" when our resigned reactions fall into line with the prediction: the behaviour they encourage results in these predictions either being avoided, delayed or on the contrary, precipitating the prediction. From this perspective, resignation is not neutral, it becomes a partner in crime with the very thing it lacks the courage to combat.

A second reason for refusing to accept defeat resides in a certain taste for panache. It is more interesting to fight, even for causes that appear to be losing battles. There is something rather elegant about such challenges. Isn't the salt of life itself found in these seemingly insignificant but noble acts, thrown in the faces of dumb cynics?

There are many who no longer believe that David can stop the Goliath of multinationals and their destructive, self-sanctifying economy. They no longer believe, because David has unfortunately been deemed an individualistic and heroic figure. And it is precisely by pushing us towards hyper-individualism that neo-liberalism weakens us and turns us into the cogs in its machine. However, we are not just one David, we are millions of Davids. We do not need to kill Goliath because we can educate him, or at least restrain him. By helping each other, we can have a more accessible and durable power than the one promised by the heroic fable. The heroes are tired and I am tired of heroes.

But let's get back to the mountains. They are often the setting for the conquests and vainglories I have already warned against in "Petites gloires" and "Loin des sommets" in my book *Planète canyons*. Talented monomaniacs are formatted by the demands of performance, completely lost in any other

from a vertiginous number of sources, hundreds of authors, thousands of studies that its critics have the rather annoying habit of casting aside as if this book was the work of just one man.

4. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *How to Think about Catastrophe: Toward a Theory of Enlightened Doomsaying*, Michigan State University Press, 2022; *Contre les collapsologues et les optimistes béats, réaffirmer le catastrophisme éclairé*, AOC, 12 November 2020 (not yet translated into English).

field than their own highly specialised one, incapable of taking the time to live and the time to love. And yet, rising up against the shallowness of the high-performance being, who is gone before you know it, is another incorruptible and quiet figure who we can all embody if we put our minds to it: the figure of the sensitive soul – who, may be described as “attentive” to avoid the pitfalls of oversensitivity. You will find no record breaking or exploits in my book, no vestiges of this competitive spirit that pits one of us up against the other by pretending to make us better people. Instead, you will find a call for contemplative behaviour. But, ever vigilant, sensitive souls do not just contemplate, they equally feel an ethical responsibility towards the object of their contemplation. They are the Righteous ones, their conscience is awakened by the ecological crisis.

Whilst storytelling strategies call for charismatic figures, the ecological movement has no need to turn to the assassins of Ghandi or Martin Luther King. And, this is precisely why the actions described in the film *Tomorrow* are so encouraging, despite their embryonic size.⁵ They show that the little people have the power, the same power they can strip from the tyrant as soon as they stop serving him, as Étienne de La Boétie suggests in his denunciation of voluntary servitude.⁶ Power that must be invested in the political field in order to regain control of our blinkered economy. Power that begins with knowledge, because to break free you must educate yourself. Sensitive and vigilant beings are not distracted beings, they are attentive beings⁷ – attentive to the beauty of the world, attentive to what threatens it, attentive to what protects it and committed to playing their part.

* * *

5. *Tomorrow: All Over the Globe, Solutions Already Exist*, documentary by Cyril Dion and Mélanie Laurent, 2015 – also 2015 for the English version. Equally exists in a more in-depth book format, published by Actes Sud in 2017 for the English version.

6. Étienne de La Boétie, *The Discourse on Voluntary Servitude, or the Against-One*, short but famous text by a friend of Montaigne, published in the 16th century. An uncountable number of reprints dominate our bookshop shelves as if they were fresh off the shelves.

7. Cf. Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*, Polity Press, 2017.

Eight types of discourse on mountains

Starting from the premise that photography enters into a dialogue with its ancestor, the history of painting, I will begin by identifying eight types of discourse that have gone hand in hand with paintings of mountains throughout their history. Secondly, I will take a more critical look at these rhetorics, whilst at the same time, conveying my own sensibilities on the subject.

These eight forms of discourse are as follows: the idealist discourse, the glorious or mystical discourse, the patriotic discourse, the romantic discourse, the embellished picturesque, the colonising discourse, the heroic discourse, the realist discourse.

Other forms of discourse can also be identified (historical, biographical, fictionalised, fantasist...), where mountains provide a setting rather than being the actual subject. I will put them to one side and limit myself here to the ones that appear to be the most common today, and which I noted in the art historian Françoise Jaunin's book, *Les Alpes suisses. 500 ans de peinture* (Éditions Mondo, 2004 – apparently not translated into English). These occasional references to Françoise Jaunin are largely exceeded by my own comments, or furthermore, influenced by the illustrated book *Paysage, fenêtre sur la nature*.⁸

If art historians refer to the “invention of landscape” (around the 17th century in Holland, even as early as the 16th century in Fontainebleau), it is because the advent of landscape as a subject for representation is a historical fact. The same can be said for mountains and this thematisation is even more recent. As Françoise Jaunin points out, mountains only began attracting artists in the late 18th century. Before that they were considered to be an error of nature, a monstrosity inhabited by demons. Even science paid them no interest. Only merchants and smugglers, migrants or fugitives fearfully dared to journey there, crossing the high passes to move from one valley to another, from one country to another.

It was only with a growing passion for the Grand Tour that aristocrats travelling to Italy fell in love with the mountains and started to see them as remarkable curiosities. Encyclopaedists, naturalists, botanists, geologists, philosophers, poets and painters headed off on a hitherto, unseen exploration, to document this land.

8. *Paysage, fenêtre sur la nature*. Collective edited by Vincent Pomarède, Marie Gord, Marie Lavandier. Jointly published by the Musée du Louvre-Lens and Lienart Editions. – Apparently not translated into English.

The idealist discourse:

With growing industrialisation in the late 18th century, cities became a breeding ground for poor living conditions – noise, pollution, ugliness, stress... –, the countryside, and even more so the mountains, were associated with virtues that could be qualified as puritan: they were claimed to be unspoilt, innocent, authentic. They were said to be virtuous even before they were declared beautiful, and Rousseau, the champion of a “return to nature”, revered them as a source of spiritual regeneration.

Nowadays, this curative approach has taken a more health-conscious direction. We go to the mountains for a breath of fresh air, to exercise, to escape from our screens...

The glorious or mystical discourse:

In the wake of Protestantism, painters from the Geneva School of landscape in particular (its most well-known advocates being François Diday and Alexandre Calame), believed that mountains brought them closer to God. Scenes from peasant life were treated in the same way as biblical scenes. Although this period seems a long way off to us now, the current need for admiring goes hand in hand with an aspiration for gratitude.

The patriotic discourse:

In the mid-19th century, Switzerland was looking for a collective identity and painters clearly felt urged to react in this respect. The “little people” were represented as the peaceful heroes of the nation.⁹ Poverty and vulgarity were disguised as “rustic nobility” and “archaic simplicity”.¹⁰ In truth, these “Shepherds with faces like Greek gods and graceful shepherdesses in beribboned costumes” had little in common with those misfortunate types whom Victor Hugo did not hesitate to call “Alpine cretins”.¹¹ Nowadays, this patriotic discourse has been appropriated by the Far Right, set against a backdrop of folklore and regional mediatisation.

The romantic discourse:

Romantics souls are interested in excess, in the sublime more than beauty. They paint catastrophes, avalanches and defeats, storms and abysses. Eternal adolescents, romantics are afraid of getting bored, they crave passion. They are seeking a grand theatre where they can turn the terrifying into something grandiose. Landscape then, is a state of mind, an emotionally intense state

9. Françoise Jaunin, *op. cit.* p. 71.

10. *Ibid.* p. 58.

11. *Ibid.* p. 35 et 32.

of mind, as if it were the portrait of one's own subjectivity animated by rebellions and the Baudelairean notion of spleen.

The embellished picturesque discourse:

Stimulated by the birth of mass tourism, the unknown masters of the late 18th- and early 19th-century mass produced "stereotypes of these unforgettable moments".¹² These pleasing paintings, which were neither sublime nor realist, became the ancestors of the modern-day postcard and were displayed at home as "proof of pilgrimage".¹³ In an attempt at enhancing these images, two curiosities were assembled together in one, the size of the glacier tables was exaggerated, the verticality of rocky spurs. The Sea of Ice began to resemble a "Gothic swell".¹⁴

The colonising discourse:

Initially, with the birth of alpinism, the mountains became a new territory to be conquered. Clearly, the vocabulary here is not ambivalent when we are talking about summits to be "conquered"! Of course, we mustn't pin this discourse on alpinism as a whole, as if all alpinists spoke the same language. Conquering mountains set the tone, then they were domesticated. The industrialisation of tourism brought with it its fair share of infrastructures: roads, bridges, viaducts, trains, cable cars, funiculars, helicopters, hotels, spas, land converted for skiing, golf... And thousands of shops where we buy things we don't really need and which we oddly call «souvenirs».

The colonising discourse is not often found in painting. It mainly flourished in the world of poster art, the ancestor of today's advertising. From this moment on, the colonising discourse proliferated in magazines as a hybrid version of the heroic discourse set against an embellished picturesque backdrop. Mountain sport champions offer their sponsors the unforgettable sight... of fancy watch packaging.

The heroic discourse:

Our eyes turn away from the mountains themselves and focus instead on the humans who confront them. Sports people have become the new heroes. Initially, it was those who "deflowered" the summits (still an annoying expression), then rapidity replaced innovation, the race to conquer the mountains turned into a mountain race, stopwatch in hand. With the advent of extreme sports, the mountains were also a means of getting an adrenaline

12. *Ibid.* p. 35.

13. *Ibid.* p. 34.

14. *Ibid.* p. 34.

hit, where exhilaration was no longer found in contemplation but in action, the headiness of mastery or the “dream of Icharus” as Françoise Jaunin so beautifully put it.

The realist discourse:

Representations of mountains in our region have never really been marked by an enthusiasm for realism, unless you count cartography, an art in which the Swiss excel.

In 17th-century European painting, a form of observational realism had already developed with the rise of natural sciences, a new curiosity encouraging artists to paint “from life”, out in the open air (well before the Impressionists), even though these “ornaments of nature” were only used as the setting for great narratives that were painted later, back in the studio.

In the 19th century, a new kind of realism, sometimes called social realism, rose up in reaction to Romanticism and which, not unlike photography, was spurred on by budding socialism. Gustave Courbet, one of the founders of this movement along with Édouard Manet and the Salon des refuses, proclaimed that “The basis of realism is a negation of the ideal”. This new form of realism depicted poverty, suffering, injustice, depredation, or banalities such as mediocrity, everyday life. When applied to the mountains – which was rarely the case in practice –, in the 19th century, this kind of realism could have shown the extremely harsh conditions of peasant life. Then, later in the 20th century, it could have shown industrial disfigurement, concrete, cable cars, scenic mountain restaurants, pylons on the mountain ridges... In the 21st century, as the heirs to the pop art legacy and claiming to adhere to realism, photographers headed up into the mountains to capture the crassness of tourists and the invasion of the landscape by hordes of consumers *en masse*. Scientific illustration is another form of realist discourse. Ancient treaties on glaciology are teeming with painted landscapes, engravings and sketches, whilst modern-day books tend to turn to photography. Of course, science is mainly interested in things that cannot be seen and which are only measurable with the help of complex instruments, concerned with anything microscopic, chemical, tectonic, fluid mechanics... And yet, these factors result in a number of phenomena that can be expressed through landscape. Both impassioned scientists and intrigued photographers find themselves on common ground.

Which attitude should be encouraged?

As a photographer and mountain dweller, but also as a reader of art philosophy on the one hand and ecological thought on the other, which image of the

mountains is most likely to move me? What kind of relationship and behaviour do I want to encourage?

The attitude of the heroic-sportsperson?

Let's start by distinguishing champions from heroes. There's a title behind each champion and a story behind every hero. Titles are lost, stories are passed on. Today's champions are tomorrow's losers. The heroes of today are heroes forever. Champions are rivals, heroes are role models. Champions are record breaking/making machines, heroes live life to the full. As the defenders of widespread competitiveness, liberal capitalists may well try to disguise champions as heroes, but their stories are dull and the only example they set is the one of being slaves to the rat race.

Sometimes however, a champion has such an outstanding track record that they can act as a role model. But the challenges they bravely face up to are adversity and human violence instead of the challenges of competition. Victory plays a secondary role in their stories of courage, tenacity, fair-play, as well as their times of weakness and crisis; we are moved by their humanity more than their victories.

Explorers stand out from champions when they escape the pressures of potential competition. Hence, they might be tempted to turn towards a more heroic model, whether it's Dionysus (adventure, exhilaration), Prometheus (power, mastery), Sisyphus (perseverance, the transformation of linear time into cyclic time), Ulysses (evasion, forgetting), etc. But these days, the heroic-sportsperson is almost exclusively characterised by their performance. This makes me extremely wary. Whilst I appreciate efficiency as a means, I reject it as an end. My whole life I have taken part in, and sometimes taught, outdoor sports. I have experienced the jubilation of speed and the satisfaction of mastery. But going fast does not mean going faster. Efficiency only manifests itself in performance via the fatal trap of comparison. As soon as we put competitiveness to one side, leisure becomes a pleasure freed of any anxiogenic pressure. In my mind, achievement requires sacrifices that largely outweigh the result, which is ultimately pointless. The difficulty of the task in hand forces beginners to focus on themselves, on their effort. Those who are looking to surpass themselves also focus on themselves and their effort. Only those who simply feel at ease remain receptive. Out of these three stages, beginners who struggle, sportspeople who enjoy, and athletes who constantly look at their watches while running; only the middle ground enables us to focus on something other than ourselves. Some adrenaline junkies use nature to improve their image, undoubtedly believing that taking risks in such an inhospitable environment will make them more popular in

the mass-mediatised public eye. Exhilarated they most certainly are, blinded by the landscape, I don't doubt either, but too preoccupied with themselves to just live in the moment. Such is the misfortune of "The Society of the Spectacle" denounced by Guy Debord in his book of the same name. Whilst I feel a certain incomprehension in regards to the performance-obsessed athlete, I feel consternation faced with spectators who remain glued to their screens (I am no longer a slave to television) or sat in front of their sports programs, closely following the progress of their sporting heroes as if sport could be experienced by procuration. I refuse this kind of stardom. Which is why I prefer to talk about physical exertion rather than sport, activity and not spectacle. And so, for the most part, the heroic-sportsperson attitude is not one of my photographic preoccupations.

The colonising attitude?

We can quite easily go to the mountains without behaving like a "tourist" in the pejorative sense of the term. It's a question of restraint.

How does a tourist behave in the mountains? They consume it.

How does a coloniser behave in the mountains ? They exploit it.

Consuming is not using, it's possessing and throwing away. Someone who uses a territory can still care about it, take care of it and preserve it. But those who consume a territory leave behind their cigarette butts, the fumes and decibels of their flashy car, their second-rate music, the prying eye of their GoPro, the humming of their drone. Between two selfies, they still manage to moan, convinced that everything is their due because they have laid out some cash.

And those who exploit the mountain can do it at a distance, as it is primarily the politico-economical posture of those who support the urban sprawl, those who disfigure and pollute, those who advocate unconditional productivism. Whilst we could compare consumers to aggressors, those who exploit the mountain can be compared to looters. The former just passes through, soiling the landscape as they go, whilst the latter persists.

Consumers produce a huge amount of images, self-promoting snaps on social media. Those who exploit also produce images, ones that transform nature into a product. But there is a third, contemplative attitude, and this is the one I would like to encourage.

The panorama:

The aesthetic of the panorama is not always innocent. It can surreptitiously play a part in the colonising discourse (in the military sense of the term), as shown by its dominating architecture, castles on headlands, its watchtowers.

Listen to Pierre Wat: “The panorama, this fantasy of “seeing it all”, as the etymology of the word indicates, is the grand notion engendered by the 19th century, at the crossroads of this desire to see and know, and the dream of a widespread spectacularisation of the world possessed. As Bernard Comment reminds us “by its own device, the panorama fulfils a desire that was particularly strong in the 19th century, the desire for complete dominion which gave each individual the euphoric feeling that the world revolved around, and began with them, a world which they were both separated and protected from by the distance of the gaze. Satiating this dual fantasy of totality and possession.”¹⁵

I am a photographer of landscapes who neglects panoramas, preferring more or less confined spaces, limited horizons, ones where our gaze lingers along the way.

This unassuming comment makes us realise that the art of landscape does not remain unaffected by ideological dimensions, that seemingly insignificant formal decisions, selections or elisions, offer just as many perspectives on the world, like choosing to concern ourselves with something fragile or something powerful, troubling, fleeting or controllable, unique or stereotyped... or furthermore choosing not to make humans the focus of our work. (The majority of photographs in my book are void of any human presence.)

The patriotic attitude?

Although I photograph in Switzerland, I do not photograph Switzerland. I am not building a mythological representation of Switzerland.

I am not interested in a collective identity, an idle form of courage so dear to supporters of all kinds, nor to this dubious notion of “roots” to which those who have never spread their wings and flown the nest are so deeply attached. Of course, patriotism is not the same thing as nationalism. You can appreciate your home without shutting yourself away. But are we so at home in our homeland that we start to sing its praises? Far from a Garden of Eden, to my mind, a homeland is the setting for the conflicts of a discordant family. And as we are part of this family, rather than fleeing, we can get involved. From this point of view, political commitment can be seen as a pragmatic redefinition of the patriotic discourse. Nevertheless, my texts are politically engaged at a different level because I am interested in the universality of human nature, and because today, environmental questions are so preoccupying, concerning the Earth’s system in its entirety. As for my images, the self-astonishment they provoke puts me in the position of the

15. *Paysage, fenêtre sur la nature*. Op. cit. p. 82.

Bernard Comment, *The Panorama*, Reaktion Books, 1999.

outsider, a traveller in a sometimes uncomfortable situation, but one who is nonetheless delighted by this change of scenery.

The romantic attitude?

First of all, let us specify that in both art history and the history of ideas, the romantic movement has little in common with the sentimental notion of romantic love. Strictly speaking, the romantic landscape is not the ideal setting for an idyll, it is first and foremost the setting for experiencing the sublime.

We often condemn these romantic images of the exhilarated, tortured, hyper-sensitive adolescent, a dandy, hair blowing in the wind, heading off for adventure against a backdrop of unspoilt and wild nature. This stereotype is not entirely false but it is reductive. Whilst romanticism is marked by revolt and insolence, rebellion, a distaste for industrial modernity and the official bourgeois culture, it also casts its eye on the small, country folk, glorifying their ancestral traditions, the cult of the past. It can equally drift towards fantasy and tragedy. Whatever the case, the romantic landscape is free of symbolism and mythology, it is raw, infinite nature, where romanticists aim to simply blend into the scenery.

In the 17th century, the great argument between the Poussinists and the Rubenists opposed the conservative partisans of drawing (and narration) with the avant-garde partisans of colour (and sensuality). Pictorial modernity inherited the legacy of the colourist victory and it has to be said that the romantics further enriched this legacy through their refusal of a symbolist, heroic or historical discourse.

I too favour this pictorial modernity: prised out of the symbolist, heroic or historical discourse, in resistance to the industry of culture that impoverished thought and turned its back on the bourgeois mediocrity that had eclipsed the state of being in favour of having and appearances.

That being said, I do not agree with the mystic-religious momentum of the romantics nor their fusional fantasy with nature. This fantasy of fusion refers back to a prenatal lack of differentiation, the great placenta of the One. I prefer relational to fusional, plurality to uniqueness.

I don't agree either with their taste for introspection and expressions of the soul, far too narcissistic for my tastes. Moreover, as long as romantics remain focused on their own subjectivity, their quest for intensity can do nothing more than oscillate between euphoria and melancholy. I am interested in prospection rather than introspection, a form of exteriority that gives me the pleasure of looking beyond myself and not the shallow, inward-looking kind. Nevertheless, the sign of a genius is producing a work that goes far beyond its

original intentions (opposed to the logorrhoea intended to justify the poorest of contemporary art productions), some romantic masterpieces light up the sky like a fleeting comet, enlightening us on the sorrows of our times

Let's take the sublime. I prefer beauty to the sublime. A sublime representation of nature involves confronting a character with something excessive or a disquieting strangeness. This blend of fascination and anxiety can take on a grandiloquent emphasis. Beauty offers a quieter spectacle, a feeling of gratitude, far from all the worry and torment.

Subglacial speleology is far too adventurous to lend itself to the romantic discourse, which is better-suited to the solitary Rambler. It is in danger of getting caught up in the heroic discourse and the spirit of conquest. In order to avoid this, the adventurer must step out of the spotlight and into the shadows. Thus moving away from the aesthetic of the sublime and back towards beauty, where nature can reclaim its starring role.

The realist attitude?

Whilst pictorial, then photographic realism has taken misery, suffering and troubles as the main focus of its combat, I personally feel that it often gets so entrenched that it fails to point us in the direction of resistance, improvement, adjustment or even towards this notion of re-enchantment that I am far from despising.

Too busy dwelling on negativity, it would appear that realists have a problem with beauty. Beauty flourishes indiscriminately, on piles of dung as it does elsewhere, and in some respects, that is precisely what is so shocking about it. But don't think that it exists regardless of the world. It just exists, period. An unbearable thought for despondent minds. Disenchantment doesn't seem to be enough for them, they must depreciate, chip away at the nightingale's song.

But I, on the contrary, am someone who listens attentively. In this respect, it doesn't have to mean abandoning realism for idealism, but moving from a disparaging form of realism to an elective realism. My photographs tell the tales of some of the most exceptional places and moments. Glaciers, these grand architects, have created their ephemeral treasures far from human life. Being interested in this beauty is not a distraction, admiration is not an escape, it's recognition. We are still in reality.

The idealist attitude?

Here, I am going to talk about nature in general and not just about mountains. The notion of an ideal nature seems just as doubtful to me as the contrary, the idea of something being against-nature. As Harari points out (cited ear-

lier), nothing is against-nature, all possibilities are found in nature. In much the same way as something going against-nature, the notion of an ideal is not natural but cultural. So what do we really have in mind then when we idealise nature? Is ideal nature completely exempt from all human intervention? How does a volcanic eruption or a tidal wave fit into this notion of ideal nature, just like droughts, flooding, prey and predator in turn, devouring each other according to the law of the jungle. A charming image! Conversely, is ideal nature a form of nature adapted by humans to make it fertile? But if it only serves as a big belly that we can rip open and loot, like in the tale of the goose with the golden eggs, then our once prosperous nature will not remain hospitable for much longer. From an ecological point of view, an ideal nature offers a biodiversity capable of regenerating itself over the long term, protected from pillaging (depletion of raw materials), defiling (pesticides, fertilisers, toxic waste and other pollution), devastation (deforestation, desertification, concreting over), or furthermore standardisation and formatting (single-crop farming, animal factories...). Hence, idealising nature in our representations would become an apologia for diversity. An idealistic representation of nature may also be understood as one that represents everything we find enchanting in nature in all its diversity. And that is the common denominator between realism and idealism. Because to exemplify the ideal it must be embodied. This is what I previously called elective realism.

We have spoken about idealism, idealisation is something else. Idealism aims for the possibility of an ideal, it searches for this ideal and constructs it, it germinates. Idealisation claims to have found it, feigning rather than actually undertaking. Advertising discourse is shaped by idealisation. It dresses up desire in the form of promises, it doesn't admire, it fantasises. Idealism is a quest, idealisation is a disguise. Those who are wary of beauty have a tendency to take this ideal for idealisation. Are they incapable of admiring? In the name of realism, they claim to strip representations of any idealistic temptations. They wallow in the mire of crudeness; it is their motto. Idealists could never be satisfied with that as they believe the harshness of reality should be avoided or remedied. From this angle, ideals can intervene like shock waves. If you condone your resignation on the pretext that "it's the reality", an idealist will ask you "what have you done about it?" In order for reality not to become the alibi of defeatism, in order for tomorrow's reality to be more inviting than today's, we have to imagine this tomorrow, put it into pictures, adjust reality to make it more desirable.

The glorious or mystical attitude?

Some people always need someone to commend for their happiness and

someone to blame for their unhappiness. They find it hard to be enthralled by a spectacle of nature without feeling the need to find someone or something responsible, a God, the Cosmos, a Spirit with whom they can connect, take communion, be in osmosis, in harmony, exchange good vibrations, re-energise themselves... In short, the same vocabulary surrounding this lack of differentiation so dear to the hearts of those I call the false *New Age* sages. Ethics means recognising the other as another. Religious, esoteric and spiritual discourse are not inclined to ethics. They are driven by the great fantasy of the One.¹⁶ I acknowledge the holistic principle whereby the whole of an organism is greater than the sum of its parts. However, I contest the belief in a so-called general communion between these parts. The entities of the world are not in communion, they are related to each other. A biotope is not a melting pot. It is not true that everything is connected and even less so that everything is in everything. On the other hand, ecological science has uncovered some extraordinary networks of interdependency. Interdependency is relational, it is not fusional. This relationship is made up of alliances as well as conflicts. Life is plural.

Contemplating is not appropriating. It's not about looking for a cause, a purpose, a function, a use, or in other words a justification – only to then express gratitude. Contemplating is not about rejoicing in the union but in the separation which is the very condition of diversity itself.

My apology of contemplation does not claim to be redeeming by clinging on to fragments of a rediscovered Eden. No Promised Land nor the illusory artificial paradise found in images, it is more a question of identifying little snippets of desirability, something to hang on to. Because you have to start by loving this world if you hope to find the force to protect it.

I value the tension that differentiates between the concerns and revolts formulated in my texts on the one hand and, on the other, the exercise of admiration at work in my photos, a permanent juggling act between criticism and praise, pros and cons, commitment and detachment, and the passion to defend these two extremes without pitting one against the other on the pretext of having to make a choice.

The embellished picturesque attitude?

Pretty is to *beautiful* what *like* is to *love*. We can aim for beauty and get

16. Jacques Derrida's thoughts on the "différant" and those of Jean-François Lyotard on the differend played a large part in deconstructing this fantasy dominating the One, already largely undermined by the critiques of religious ideology developed by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, based on the earlier work of Copernicus, Galileo and Darwin.

lost on the way. Pretty then, is a second rate form of beauty, pleasing, so-so, not something that stirs us. But we can also turn our backs on beauty in favour of repetition, formulas, the commonplace, clichés (like the unknown masters Françoise Jaunin mentioned). There is nothing experimental here, only unkept promises. It's rehashed.

Let's take the example of language. We say that mythomaniacs embellish their stories. Although they deviate from the truth, they still refer to it, justifying it, betraying it. If they are talented – some mythomaniacs are even geniuses –, it can be hilarious or fascinating, but it still remains untrue. But when they are not talented and they keep on repeating themselves, mythomaniacs become tiresome. As for poets, can we tell when they are deviating from the truth? Music is neither true nor false, the poet's song neither, it opens up a world. We could say the same about photography. Those who enhance their photos are like mythomaniacs, they exaggerate and their photos become lacklustre. In contrast, composers are like poets and musicians, they reveal something that has value in its own right.

Nowadays, many decision-makers in the artworld devote their careers to promoting poor quality works in inconceivably rhetorical packaging, turning their backs on poets and thus simultaneously signing their death warrant. By confusing beauty and prettiness, by appreciating neither, they gladly denigrate beauty by the way of epithets such as decorative, ornamental, aesthetizing, old-fashioned, reactionary... without really taking the time to analyse the terms they are using to facilitate their expedition. In their eyes, the picturesque is inevitably embellished, nothing but a mirage, something pleasant for gawkers. And yet, what does picturesque actually mean? It is literally "something that deserves to be painted". Photographers who had adhered to pictorialism, (a movement that cannot be reduced down solely to the Mannerist digressions it was criticised for), understood something much deeper than what stuck in the minds of their detractors. Pictorial art transcends the picturesque in the same way poetization transcends contemplation. But that is an entirely different subject to the quest for embellishing the picturesque.

The pictural attitude:

What deserves to be painted if not painting itself? If you paint a mountain, it's ultimately because you love painting. So what you really paint then, is not so much the mountain as a painting of the mountain. This important difference is obvious to painters but not to philistines who struggle to tear themselves away from the simple representative function. They find it even harder when it comes to photography and not painting. And yet, if you photograph a mountain it's through a passion... for photography. Nevertheless, why does

a painting or a photograph require it to be this particular mountain, from this angle, in this light, to the point we say its picturesque? It's because art history has had a hand to play. Taking photos involves making what you see resonate with your own visual culture. As I said earlier, the 17th century marked the invention of landscape. If you travelled back in time to the 15th century and you said to the mountain dwellers that you were painting the mountain because you found it beautiful, they would think you were mad. Conversely, artists today do not think that people who photograph anything and everything are mad, just insensitive in some way. Insensitive to what? Insensitive to the picturesque, to the call of painting, to elevating our gaze; our way of seeing. But the billions of photographs circulating on social networks have nothing to do with paintings nor gazes, they are nothing more than visual chitchat where «cool» images are «liked» then «scrolled» at such an alarming rate that looking at them all day long becomes almost a full-time job. On an ecological level, it's quite mind-blowing: an estimated 100 million videos and photos are posted every day on Instagram alone – and all of them are stored in data centers! Faced with this visual orgy, the call of painting acts as a filter; cleansing, parsimonious, elegant. It invites us to actively step into the scene, enriching it artistically.

Beauty provokes a wonderment that makes time stand still. Our imagination treads water, our eyes widen, exhilarated, captivated. Beauty is a mystery that offers itself up to our gaze without revealing all its secrets. There is otherness in beauty. Painters and photographers who come close to it are inhabited by this beauty. They are nothing more than its guardian, exhilarated by this state of “nonpossession”. Contemplating requires being interested in something other than yourself, it means forgetting yourself for a moment. This relationship with otherness is where aesthetics converges with ethics: this breathtaking aesthetic carries an instantly perceptible acknowledgement of the dignity we behold. Hence, poetization can be understood as a way of manifesting this dignity.

The pictorial attitude begins with contemplation and moves towards poetization. I hold this ninth form of discourse on mountains in the greatest esteem.

Eulogy to contemplation:

As I have said, the pictorial attitude and the poetization from which it arises transcend contemplation. Not everybody feels concerned by such an exercise. But on the other hand, contemplation is within reach of all of us, children, the meek, and it doesn't require any other skill than being receptive, having a heartfelt desire, we might say if the expression wasn't so trite. We are at the antipodes of the «society of the spectacle» where all of

our actions and gestures are put on show in the grand, competitive arena encouraged throughout all aspects of our life. Contemplating does not mean using nature as the grandiose setting for our ostentatious gesticulations. The contemplative attitude calls for a discretion as great as the one that makes us hold our breath so as not to scare the creature we surprise on the trail. Discretion, as a condition of pleasure, is the aristocracy of attentive souls. Contemplation should not be confused with distraction, it is not a moment of inattention. Whilst the “consumer society” is characterised by the perpetual, transient flux of distractions without endeavour, contemplation in contrast, is characterised by the aptitude to linger, to revisit, to persevere. The first is quantitative, the second qualitative. The first is a chain of atomised and transitory presents, the second is enduring, deep-rooted. The first diverts our attention, the second forces us to focus. The first promotes productivism, the second promotes reduced consumption. It makes us feel a strong sense of meaning, it grounds us... We are a far cry from the perpetual bad taste of passing fashions (is an ever-changing taste really a taste at all?). We are equally freed from functionalism because contemplating does not mean using. Contemplation does not expect a response or service; contemplation is only looking to love.

Animal laborans is so occupied with the demands and constraints of their everyday lives that they focus on surviving rather than just living a good life. The contemplative type is someone who stands tall after bending over double with the strains of laborious necessities. And so, we do not have to choose between an active or contemplative lifestyle. Our contemporary society has been under the illusion that it had to make a choice by sacrificing the contemplative life under the diktat of action or the agitation that passes itself off as action.

We will only become civilised if we limit our actions to what is really essential, freeing up more time for contemplation. “The pure form of time” is undoubtedly the “refound” time Proust talked about and which Heidegger aspired to.¹⁷ Us moderns, us impatient ones, have lost time. Finding it again is not a quest reserved for the idle. Ecology’s energy-saving imperative will lead us there one way or another. A contemplative approach that invites us to reappropriate time seems as important to me as the discourse and lessons of this educational, if not proselyte art (inform, explain, “question”) that seems to be flourishing everywhere; this “logocentric” art (centred on the *logos*) regretted by Derrida, is so obsessed with the signified that it skims over the signifier, so *responsible* that it forgets to love. Contemplation and

17. See Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingerings*, Polity Press, 2017. This broadly inspired me for the two preceding paragraphs.

action are akin to the trade-off between gift and counter-gift (receiving, giving). The former is not any the less important because there is as much love in listening as there is in declarations. Contemplative photography demands curiosity and wonderment, it welcomes shows of sensibility. It would be entirely wrong to mistake this means of awakening sensibility for passiveness. Being attentive is not passive. Attentiveness is a fundamental exercise that rekindles memory and knowledge in order to give recognition to the object of our contemplation.

* * *