Celestial landscapes: the supranational imagination in Luxembourg’s pre-World War I press
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This study examines the metaphorical means through which political independence was translated into national identity in Luxembourgish literature between 1900 and 1940. It shows how industrialisation provided an aesthetic canvas for literary modernism and how the writer and journalist Batty Weber and his contemporaries sought to modernise a dominant ideological attachment to the soil by instituting the sky as the embodiment of ideational change. While, for them, the smoky industrial skies symbolised democratic interactions between societies, celestial landscapes also met other ideological purposes in the contemporary Luxembourgish literary imagination, serving as a useful metaphor for spatial and intellectual development.

Keywords: Luxembourg; literature; transnational; modernism; sky; imagination

Introduction

When Luxembourg came to be recognised as an independent state de jure at the Congress of Vienna (1815), a Grand Duchy was formed based on the former Duchy of the same name and given a new border, a new constitution and a new ruling family. This political break from the neighbouring countries, followed by further steps towards full sovereignty, such as the Treaty of London (1839), meant that the need for a sustained national identity became imperative. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the ‘responsibility to create a new sense of political legitimacy’ (Péporté, Kmec, Majerus, & Margue, 2010, p. 243) had become urgent and different concepts of national identity, which are also reflected in and by the creation of landscape, started developing.

In terms of macro-public policy, the invention of a typically Luxembourgish landscape gathered momentum particularly in the 1920s, when the state subsidised the Touring Club and employed creative writers to compose official brochures that staged Luxembourg’s landscapes and monuments for consumption by foreign visitors (Lacaf, 1972). Simultaneously, conservative and conservationist organisations, often presenting a distinctly right-wing agenda, sought to stop the cultural changes associated with modernity and alleviate the rural exodus through the celebration of ‘authentic’ rural landscapes (Sunnen, 2008).

The celebration of natural landscapes, however, caused the omission and neglect of the hugely expanding steel industry located in the South of the country, which developed exponentially following the re-discovery of significant iron ore (Minette) deposits in the

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1860s. The introduction of the Thomas-Gilchrist process in 1879, which made the extraction of phosphorus possible, further gave the industry an enormous boost, immensely increasing the quality and quantity of the steel produced in Luxembourg and propelling the small and predominantly rural country to rank sixth in world steel production by 1913 (Lorang, 1994, p. 18). While the discourse of national identity was tendentially based on an ideological attachment to the soil, the literary avant-garde embraced industrial modernity and employed the chromatic intensity of the industrial fires and smokes as symbols for intellectual progress and supranational cosmopolitan exchange, offering an aesthetic and political alternative to nationalist thought. (Millim, 2014).

The attachment to, and longing for, an ‘original’ home at the heart of nationalist and protectionist attitudes is characteristic of Luxembourg’s homeland literature, shaped by writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Michel Lentz (1820–1893), Michel Rodange (1827–1876), Willy Goergen (1867–1942) and, as I shall show, to an extent also Nicolas Ries (1876–1941). Avant-garde writers, particularly in the 1910s, challenged, expanded, and transcended the project of national landscape by employing industry as both an artistic subject and a literary metaphor. If the thematic and aesthetic integration of industry can be seen as a sign of a modernist worldview and a metaphor for intellectual progress, the literary engagement with the subject demonstrates a desire to create new traditions and expand the parameters of artistic expression. The fact that some of the major progressive writers of the period, such as Batty Weber (1860–1940), Frantz Clément (1882–1842) and Pol Michels (1897–1956) chose cloudscape, rather than exclusively landscape, as an aesthetic canvas onto which to project their political ideals, indicates their desire to foster a new aesthetic tradition that could advocate the intellectual and cultural advancement of society and allow Luxembourg to shed its agrarian identity.

The formation of national identity in Luxembourg has been complicated by the particularities of its political, linguistic, and cultural situation. While the Luxembourgish population spoke Luxembourgish, a vernacular which was part of Moselle-Franconian, this small country ‘at the cross-roads of Romance and Germanic cultures’ was (and is) strongly ‘influenced by both in its folklore as well as its cultural and linguistic customs’ (Hausemer, 2008, p. 1). Despite the challenge of conflicting cultural identifications, literature in the vernacular was pioneered in 1829 with Antoine Meyer’s (1801–1857) ‘E’ Schrek op de’ Lezeburger Parnassus’ and developed into a rich tradition of homeland literature, propagated by Michel Lentz (1820–1893), Edmond de la Fontaine (1823–1891), and Michel Rodange (1827–1876; Hausemer, 2008, p. 1). In order to build a nation following Luxembourg’s political independence, the homeland writers focused on the physical uniqueness of the national territory, establishing rural life, as evidenced by the predominantly agricultural wine-making Moselle-region, the fertile Gutland (Good Land) and the rough North (Oesling), as authentically Luxembourgish.

**The sky and the modernist gaze**

While Weber and the other writers examined here also produced many traditional landscape writings, they were eager for their readers to understand their position within an international network of thought. I focus primarily on some of Batty Weber’s works, whose political beliefs were liberal and who published widely abroad. Through his extraordinarily abundant writings and public appearances, Weber significantly ‘strengthened Luxembourg’s cultural confidence’, representing the country’s particularity beyond
the national context (Marson, 2007, pp. 640–641). Similarly, Frantz Clément (1882–1942), as the editor of the Social Democrat newspaper Escher Tageblatt and prolific journalist and creative writer, exerted considerable influence on Luxembourg’s cultural life for three decades. The Francophile writer and teacher Nicolas Ries (1876–1941), whose magazine Cahiers luxembourgeois (1924–) ‘significantly contributed to the invention of landscape in Luxembourg’, was progressive in the sense that he established Luxembourg as an object of study, but conservative in that he rooted identity in the concreteness of the soil (Sunnen, 2011, p. 6). The left-wing activist and expressionist poet Pol Michels (1897–1956), who connected Luxembourg to the international avant-garde by publishing widely abroad, was critical of nation-building metaphors and questioned the value of Luxembourgish culture. His post-World War I work highlights the overwhelmingly positive connotations that had been attributed to the sky as a metaphorical stage for progressive thought by the previous generation of writers.

In contrast to the homeland writers, these authors display a modernist orientation, which is evidenced by their close affiliation with the literary magazine Floréal (1907–1908), of which Frantz Clément was a founding member. Floréal embodied a genuinely new approach to both art and the conceptualisation and delimitation of nationhood. While the homeland authors, writing in the vernacular from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, had asserted their Luxembourgish identity through exclusively addressing an audience of native speakers, Floréal pursued an alternative agenda. Adamantly insisting that Luxembourgish culture was inherently a Mischkultur (mixed culture), the Floréal writers rejected the nationalists’ essentialist claim of an organic connection between the soil and identity. The bilingual German- and French-language magazine did aim to strengthen the public’s appreciation of Luxembourg as a cultural centre that produced valuable literature and innovative philosophical thought. However, for the Floréal contributors, a Luxembourgish sense of self could and should only develop in a malleable international context. Similarly, for them, meaningful thought could not occur in an inward-looking, and therefore, self-limiting environment, but depended on the interaction between different cultures. In this endeavour, the magazine saw itself as a vehicle that could heighten the visibility of Luxembourgish culture abroad and function as what Germaine Goetzinger calls a ‘pedagogical’ facilitator that introduced the ideas prevalent in international literary movements to the Grand Duchy’s audience (Goetzinger, 1986, p. 58).

Although Luxembourg’s tourist industry mostly launched sustained campaigns to present its typical national landscape to an international public in the 1920s, the homeland poets had already grounded national identity within landscape. Willy Goergen’s poetry collection Blummen a Blieder (Flowers and Leaves) of 1905 is characteristic of the homeland literature of the time in that it encouraged the religiously motivated contemplation and collection of natural details, rather than the aesthetic enjoyment of entire landscapes or riverscapes. The flagship poem ‘Flowers and Leaves’, presents the natural world as an animated ensemble of multiple individually conscious elements, establishing the human being as the centre of creation. Nature is seen to be longing for interaction with the narrator:

When in the mild spring air
You wander through field and forest,
There a little flower, there a little leaf, pops out
To tell you something sweet.
Those you like the most,
You take home to your house,
That they may keep you company
When the weather keeps you inside.
The storms may rage outside,
But you are just fine inside;
You have got the spring right in your little room,
Smiling at you through each little leaf. (1–12)

Omitting the disharmonious skies ravaged by wind and rain, this poem presents the withdrawal from the external world, the fragmentation of landscape, and the transplantation of the spring into the domestic environment as the triumph of the individual over the larger community. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, in Luxembourgish poetry written between 1900 and 1940, the direction of the lyrical gaze indicates the ontological positioning of the poet (Millim, 2013). The homeland poets believed that God’s care was administered through the warmth of the sun and the fruitful loveliness of the country’s plants and fields. In order to adequately worship God’s creation, the narrator dutifully observes the reflection of the sun on the ground and devotes his or her attention to the animated earthbound beauty that seeks to capture and immobilise the gaze. The contemplation of the ground and its beauties is characteristic of a desire to root identity in the soil and thus to render Luxembourg’s nationhood legitimate, permanent and organic.

The modernist gaze, on the other hand, is active, mobile, at times even abstract and decidedly non-religious: the narrator surveys his or her environment from an elevated position, gazes into the distance and imagines utopian sights. As Edward Timms has observed, during the early twentieth century, ‘in every sphere – painting, poetry, and the novel – the dynamics of city life generated new forms of expression which accentuated its energy and turmoil. Conventional modes of representation were no longer adequate’ (Timms, 1985, p. 3). By incorporating the sky into its thematic and aesthetic circumference, the writers under investigation responded to a general re-thinking of the means of expression available, significantly widening the range by framing the observers’ visual consciousness and so adapting it to modern urban circumstances and ideas. As well as averting religious associations, the upward gaze avoided the necessarily exclusive selfhood of landscape formation, which, according to Denis E. Cosgrove, is an ideological concept that:

represents a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature, and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to external nature. (Cosgrove, 1998, p. 15)
The new conditions were of course not formally accommodated universally, either in Luxembourg or elsewhere. According to Ysanne Holt, ‘at the very moment of industrialisation, the spread of capitalism and its emergent social relations, the depiction of an ideal and harmonious rural life became, and has since remained, an urgent and significant pressure’ (Holt, 2003, p. 152). While the modernists, and Batty Weber in particular, proposed the sky as a neutral and universal territory in which, and projected onto which, thought could flow freely and uninterruptedly, the homeland poets sought to preserve and monumentalise the authenticity of the village through an exclusive and highly moralistic focus on field work, nature scenes, and the yearly seasonal cycle.

In the history of aesthetics, the sky, like the sea, has been a ‘recurrent symbol’ (Lillyman, 1969, p. 116), which, according to Susan Stewart, ‘offers itself as [a] visual experience’ but ‘cannot be encompassed’ as such (Stewart, 1996, p. 99). Because the sky is ‘in motion even when seemingly in stasis’, it ‘[supersedes] whatever media might capture or frame it’ (Stewart, 1996, p. 99). Writing about the sky is thus a utopian endeavour, and, for Stewart, this conscious desire to think about and represent the unrepresentable is a self-reflective activity: ‘through works of art about the sea and sky, we search in our vision of forces of nature for some record of the force of our own thought’ (Stewart, 1996, p. 109). Due to its fundamental evasiveness, formal inconsistency and inestimable depth, the sky is a transient symbol and a surface that cannot be inscribed upon. Because projection onto the sky must thus remain incomplete, thought cannot materialise into dogma, and therefore, necessarily remains open-ended. The secular contemplation of the sky is, therefore, better suited for entertainment than for indoctrination. Although John Ruskin’s ‘Of Truth of Skies’ in Modern Painters I (1843) quite conservatively presents the sky as a realm created by nature with the ‘sole and evident purpose of talking to [man] and teaching him’ – a notion that recalls Luxembourg’s homeland poets – the sky also provides entertainment in an egalitarian fashion: ‘the sky is for all’ (Ruskin, (1843/1848), p. 201). For Ruskin, the sky is simultaneously eternal and transient; it is composed of ‘things which the angels work out for us daily, and yet vary eternally, which are never wanting, and never repeated, which are to be found always, yet each found but once’ (Ruskin, (1843/1848), p. 203). Ruskin’s animated sky translates his insistence on the beneficence of change.

While in much literary writing, the smoky red sky is presented as an emblematic symbol of the regional identity of Luxembourg’s South, as Myriam Sunnen and Sandra Schmit have shown, the writers examined here did not pursue a regional agenda when aestheticising the sky. They rather sought to supersede all geographical, ideological, and aesthetic constraints, which, in their view, impeded intellectual progress. For them, smoke had a dual role: firstly, it was the physical proof of the human capability of modifying the environment and of productively exploiting the resources available. Secondly, the amazing movement of billowing smoke brought about a decidedly modern visual experience. Preceding the German feuilletonist Joseph Roth, they instituted the sky as the visual representation of intermingling thoughts. In his 1926 feuilleton ‘Smoke Connects Cities’, which describes the industrial output of the nearby Ruhrgebiet, Roth establishes the sky as a supranational site of human interaction: ‘the inhabitants imagine that they are Westphalians on the left and Rhinelanders on the right. But what are they really? Inhabitants of the smoke land, the big smoke city, creditors of smoke, workers of smoke, children of smoke’ (Roth, 1983, p. 22). Although, for Roth, smoke is the concretisation of human effort, it is superior to its human origin, because it cannot be tied down and resists ‘the sentimental weight’ of the human need for possession and territorialisation (p. 23).
The grey skies of modernity are thus superior to the empty blue skies of the past, because they prove that the universality of the fruits of the human mind can overcome arbitrary constructs of nationhood and regionality. Like Roth, Weber and Clément question the timeliness of imagining landscapes based on monuments, which ‘were built of eternal stone to last for centuries’ and have survived because their building stock is durable, but not ‘because there is any vitality left in them’ (pp. 22–23). Unlike these static ‘slumbering portals and dreamy beauties’ (p. 23), smoke is seen to visualise and advance the creative spirit.

Smoke and beauty
The framing of a national gaze appreciative of Luxembourg’s natural capital, as Myriam Sunnen has argued, is, to a large extent, based on the essentialist theories that Nicolas Ries established in the 1911 treatise *Essay on the Psychology of the Luxembourgish People*. In this first coherent theorisation of landscape, Ries insists on the ‘secret conformities between the soil and its inhabitants’ (Ries, 1911, p. 77) and equates knowledge of the environment with knowledge of the self:

They [the Luxembourgish people] do not attribute too much importance to their picturesque environment and tourism has taken a long time to develop in this magnificent country. It does not seem like they feel or see the beauty of the romantic landscapes that frame the idyllic peace of their villages like a superb garland; and, if you direct their attention to it, they look at you stunned. This is because they have been seeing all this splendour for a long time, and such picturesque sites astound them as little as the starry sky, which, for them, has lost the charm of the unknown. On the other hand, they are first and foremost practical people, who primarily think of the work and effort that such landscapes impose upon them (pp. 175–176).

Ries portrays the landscape gaze as an advanced stage in an evolutionary system. Since the farmers fuse with their environment physically and mentally, their perception of it is tactile, rather than visual, and therefore their gaze towards the ‘starry sky’ is the futile glance at the epitome of the known world. The sky represents a cosmic certainty, which, because of its unalterable and unquestioned presence, is so real that it is no longer part of reality. Considering Cosgrove’s point that the concept of landscape, as well as landscape painting, became relevant ‘in the most economically advanced, densest settled and most highly urbanised regions of fifteenth-century Europe’, it is conceivable that these impoverished Luxembourgish farmers did not require the visual and philosophical technique of perspective to achieve ‘spatial control’, because their relationship with nature was mostly functional (Cosgrove, 1998, p. 20). Through identifying the invisibility of land and sky as a curiosity, Ries established them both as dimensions worthy of visual exploration and integral to Luxembourgish landscape.

Productive skies
While for Ries the sky remained a physical surface, Batty Weber’s work presented several instances in which he constructed the sky as a celestial landscape and as a symbol for intellectual and social liberation. In his long career as a writer, Weber wrote countless essays on traditional landscapes, published in various venues – the journal of the Touring Club is one example – manifesting a distinct belief in the impact of the environment on personal character. However, his novel *Fenn Kass* (1912), first published as a feuilleton
novel in the German newspaper *Kölnische Zeitung*, and his 1913 feuilleton entitled ‘Clouds’, published in the *Luxemburger Zeitung* on 19 November 1913 as part of his feuilleton series *Abreisskalender* (1913–1940), demonstrate that for him, on the verge of World War I, self-knowledge as a nation was an important precondition for international interactions and did not necessarily lead to exclusive nationalism.

The novel *Fenn Kass* can be seen as a unique project to advocate and equate human liberty and industrial progress. It is set in a rural context and has, therefore, frequently and undeservedly been ascribed the badge of homeland novel, as Michelle Pleger (1985) has shown. Fenn Kass, the main protagonist, stands out in his community because of his exceptional intelligence and kindness. As was customary in fin-de-siècle Luxembourg, the common career path for the most promising students was priesthood, which Fenn embarks on with great idealism and enthusiasm, convinced that the prominent position of the priest will allow him to make significant changes to his village’s social and economic structure. When his plans to modernise the village’s agricultural infrastructure by constructing a small electric power station fail and when he can no longer stomach the corruption and reactionary dogmatism that characterise the clergy, he quits the priesthood and gets on a train to Munich to become an engineer. Although *Fenn Kass* cannot be classified as an *Entwicklungsroman*, because the character presents little personal development, as Josiane Weber (2001) has noted, his journey towards self-liberation and enlightenment is consistently punctuated and illustrated by his upward gaze and descriptions of the sky as an abstract, far away but nevertheless reachable place. The sky at once represents, symbolises, and signifies the hope for the realisation of the human ‘programme’ (Ortega Y Gasset, 1941, p. 117). *Fenn Kass* can be seen as the embodiment of Gasset’s ‘man the technician’, because:

> in the very root of his essence [he] finds himself called upon to be an engineer. Life means to him at once and primarily the effort to bring into existence what does not exist offhand, to wit: himself. In short, human life ‘is’ production. (Ortega Y Gasset)

If industrial production represents the concretisation of the human idea, its visual manifestation in the sky testifies to human creativity, inventiveness, and the potential – intellectual and practical – to turn ideas into reality.

When Joseph Hurt establishes *Fenn Kass* as the ‘beginning of our homeland art’, he immediately corrects himself and adds that Weber ‘did not give us the homeland novel we could have expected’ because the author presents himself as a ‘cosmopolitan, rather than a homeland artist’ (Hurt, 1925, p. 3). This cosmopolitan attitude in a rural context is indeed unmistakable in Weber’s landscape descriptions from the outset of the novel:

> The three-canton street is prettiest on sunny September evenings [when] a golden fog puffs between the mountains at the horizon. It is the dissolving smoke of the blast furnaces in the South and in the West. There they are melting the ore that the brown Italians are pulling out of the innards of the earth, and, behind these mountains over there, where three borders meet each other and the sonorous French of the Longwy basin blends in with the defiant gutturals of old-German new-Lotharingian and the broad-gauge Luxembourgish dialect of the Esch region, the sun sinks slowly into the smokes of twilight, creating glowing gilded veils. (Weber, 2001, p. 15)

The idyllic, ‘beautiful and dusty white’ (Weber, 2001, p. 15) street, which is lined with trees and populated by village traffic, becomes sublime through the industrial presence.
The radiant sky, naturally illuminated by the descending sun, is turned into a work of art by the factory smokes which reflect and intensify the sun—a canvas decorated by embodied human intellect. The smokes of Esch, the rapidly expanding steel capital located in Southern Luxembourg, are the physical testimony and mirror of the cultural exchange generated by industrial production; just as the smoke from different furnaces blend into each other, so do the nationalities, languages, and cultural particularities of the immigrant workforce lose their pertinence and merge into a transnational community.

From his early habit of reading scientific books, such as *The History of the Steam Engine*, by the skylight in the attic, Fenn distinguishes himself from the other characters by his frequent contemplation of the sky, which Weber presents as a sign of his excellence. Upon entering the seminary for Roman Catholic priests in Luxembourg city—a place of terror for most of his fellow students—he seeks consolation and inspiration in the visual aspect of the landscape that he can see from his desk in the study lounge:

Fenn was assigned a desk on the Southeast side of the room, very close to the window, which allowed his gaze to travel over wavy terrain to the smoky heights of the ore-region. Immediately, from the first minute, the place became dear to him. Through the window he heard the roaring and whistling of the trains on the Belgian and French lines, he saw the whitish grey smoke of the engines [...] crawl hastily through the landscape like a caterpillar with a pointy head and a wobbling tail, and, in the evening, he saw the sky glow with the reflection of the blast furnaces, which, behind the horizon, lived their growling existence. (Weber, 2001, p. 80)

Fenn does not love the place he finds himself in, but the places he can see and imagine when looking out from the school windows. Technology has created a new type of landscape; one that is no longer limited to the static immediacy of nature. The metaphorisation of the smoke as a caterpillar, much like the celestial light of the furnaces, rather indicates a world in the act of becoming. Both the smoke and the train are mobile and liminal elements that transform a stationary two-dimensional landscape into a moving multidirectional skyscape. Due to their mobility, the train and smoke are not simply consumable products of human industry that validate human society, but they also hold the promise of a destination unforeseeable at the moment of contemplation. The modern multidimensional landscape, which includes cloudscape, thus combines a multiplicity of meanings and is, therefore, not merely a monument or symbol, but represents life being lived. The train, like the smoke, is capable of superseding national boundaries, and thus, moves from the actual physical community of villagers to potential, temporary and imagined communities that form independently of national or regional territory.

Despite the constant mobility of the clouds, Fenn is able to ground himself ideologically and emotionally in the ever-changing celestial spectacle. When his superior questions his faith and barks: ‘Fenn Kass, why are you not enthusiastic [about religion]?’ (Weber, 2001, p. 109), Fenn reacts to the pressure by defiantly transposing his consciousness to an ideal placeless place that makes him forget the unpleasant present:

He did not lower his gaze but raised it, letting it wander up the walls, where the bony head of the old man hung next to images of saints, through the branches of the rubber tree, out of the window into the brightly illuminated cloudy sky. These were the same white sunclouds that had passed over his childhood days, back then, when no one was trying to press his soul into a stiff shape. At that moment, a big luminous cloud-structure passed overhead in the Southern sky; a fantastic snowy mountain range with brilliantly white firs, with dizzying
abysses [...]. The good demon of his childhood was beating its wings around him, and [Fenn] felt as strong as he would at home, where he was rooted; at home, where he could breathe all the air of the valleys and hills and forests and fields. (Weber, 2001, p. 109)

In this passage, Weber constructs one of his most intricate celestial landscapes: the light spectacle and sublime malleability of the clouds mimic geographic shapes that surpass the domesticised nature (the house plant) and self-glorification of the principal’s office in intensity, taste and imaginativeness. The aesthetic and ideological variance of the sky is an obvious image for liberal and productive thought as opposed to the oppressive rigidity of the clerical world-view. Although the endless array of shapes that the clouds assume is unrepeatable, they conjure up childhood memories for Fenn. Continuity in motion, the cloudscape is here portrayed as a spatio-temporal dimension in which the self can retrieve and adopt its ideal state and feel ontologically grounded. Weber, thus questions geographic determinism; he even questions the very relevance and existence of place when he establishes the clouds as a moving space to which Fenn can mentally return. The clouds function as a representative of the past and can, ironically, be seen as the materialisation of the concept of home.

The frameless canvas

Weber’s 1913 feuilleton ‘Clouds’ strips the cloudscape created in Fenn Kass of their narrative content. Here, Weber wished to school the readers’ gaze and help them conceptualise an aesthetic completely unrestrained by traditional structures of meaning. He was ‘not trying to compose a piece of prose on the clouds’ but to ‘inspire his readers to create pleasure for themselves by looking at the clouds’ (Weber, 1985, p. 145), which encourages an independent engagement with the world: ‘there is something special in the movement of the clouds, which cannot be found anywhere else in nature. The movement of everything else is bound, finite and unfree’ (p. 146). Rather than explicitly advocate a tolerant and open-minded visual and social attitude, Weber uses images of earthbound nature phenomena to illustrate the boundedness of conformity: ‘Trees that bend in the storm, cornfields that dance in the wind, ocean waves that break against the shore, are all enchained. Their movement is not free, but a longing for freedom, [a] rattling [of] the prison bars’ (p. 146). While these movements are forever repeated within the confines of gravity, clouds present unlimited mobility, formal variability, and chromatic nuance. The range of expressions of celestial shapes allows the artistic and aesthetic imagination to enter new dimensions: ‘Only clouds can truly visualise movement or stillness. They hunt, they pass, they gently float or rest immobile. Nothing on earth can represent hunting, passing, floating and resting like they can’ (p. 146). The fact that Weber portrayed the cloudscape as a performative instance indicates his clear awareness that landscape is always constructed by the human observer. Whereas concrete landscapes are no more than projective canvases, the clouds’ formal malleability allows them to execute the metaphorical movement attributed to them. Through the absence of fixed formal or thematic parameters in the cloudscape, Weber can imagine movement outside of causality and purpose. The cloudscape represents and advocates a new type of beauty that transcends the specificity of location. Not only do the clouds evade stasis, but the scene that Weber describes is logistically altogether exchangeable: any modern city will produce the scenes he depicts.
Like Weber, Clément actively promoted pan-European cultural exchange and democratic rights in a conservative environment. In some of his progressive essays, industry functioned as a metaphor for social and intellectual progress. His 1913 feuilleton, entitled ‘Is Esch beautiful?’, for instance, is an example of a ‘modernist miniature’ (Huyssen, 2007) that highlights the aesthetic qualities of the steel metropolis and ridicules traditional forms of beauty as grandmotherly fairy-tales: ‘Esch doesn’t possess the beauty of quiet idylls, but the beauty of strength’ (Clément, 1913, p. 2). While Clément was eager to put Esch on the cultural map, he did so not with the aim of defining regional boundaries, but of highlighting Esch’s status as a porous modern metropolis. The technological and intellectual progress that fuelled the development of industry is exemplified in the aspect of the sky: ‘the chimneys blow their smoke into the clouds and tint them a different colour every second’ (Clément, 1913, p. 2). The human ability to mould the environment has conquered the sky; through technology, humans have become capable of painting the sky, which is still seen as a canvas, but one that is endless and three-dimensional, and which therefore, reflects the similarly limitless possibilities of human thought.

Where Goergen had advocated the appropriation, contemplation, and preservation of static natural details, the modernists’ gaze is not only photographic, but cinematographic. Their desire to visually encompass momentous movement is of a possessive nature, but it seeks to capture the movement of the sky in order to advocate the movement of the mind. Thus portraying the extraordinary in the ordinary and the value of widely and freely available visual entertainment, Weber and Clément can be seen to have catered to a ‘mass subjectivity’ (Castronovo, 2007, p. 96). The easily accessible spectacle of the cloudy sky conjured a feeling of anonymous familiarity that was both unique in its immediacy and universal in its repeatable everydayness. The modernist texts in question thus aimed to create an imagined community that was united by an upward gaze, rather than through commonalities based on difference, such as class, place of birth, profession, political orientation or nationality.

In the aftermath of World War I, the poet Pol Michels implicitly questioned the efforts of Weber, Clément and Ries to frame the country’s narratives by creating a dystopian non-landscape as a representation of the suffocating cultural climate in Luxembourg after the war:

Our country lacks that specific something that gives rise to eternal values. Day rises and night falls, here, like everywhere else. But the endlessness of the starred sky does not heave above our heads. There are no wide horizons; immediately we see the border marks. There is no room here for genius to run free. We have no space, we have no air for ideals and ambitions, which are one and the same. We haven’t got enough soil to root the truly big person. (Michels, 1924, p. 582)

Published in 1924, in one of the first issues of Ries’s Cahiers luxembourgeois, Michels’s feuilleton subverted the use of the sky and soil as a metaphor for ideational landmarks. Instead, he pronounced the end of the concept of land or skyscape. According to him, a country as small as Luxembourg possessed neither a physical nor a mental sphere large enough to form a national self. Therefore ‘Luxembourg does not exist’, except as an ‘exclusively technical construct of our neighbours’ (p. 582). For Michels, the absence of the sky symbolised the breakdown of the ideas of his predecessors: he refuted both Ries’s geographic determinism, and Weber and Clément’s rootless ideological grounding in the
clouds by denying the importance of the national gaze to identity. Only the gaze from without could signify the otherwise insignificant territory, but the gaze from within collapsed under the Luxembourgers’ utilitarian contentment. Michels’s choice of the sky as operational metaphor denotes the integration of this conceptual image into Luxembourg’s ontological landscape.

Conclusion
This study then shows how cloudscape, due to its constantly transforming form, could be used to visualise the projection of particular meanings onto the sky. Because the precise topographical naming of the sky is far more elusive than that of easily locatable geographical landmarks, the process of ideational changing and shifting perception is all the more readable in the construction of a cloudscape. My brief selection of texts from before World War I indicates that at this historical moment in Luxembourg, nationalism was experienced as desirable and necessary for strengthening national independence, but also as suffocating and dangerous, as it was often based on static tradition. The aesthetic exploitation of cloudscape can thus be seen as an attempt to imagine a flexible and open nation in constant intellectual and economic exchange with the world. While it would be an exaggeration to claim that cloudscapes were employed abundantly, these examples, widely disseminated in the press of the day, demonstrate the vagueness of the concept of nationhood.

Notes on contributor
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