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A FILMIC MONTAGE: REVISITING JEANNERET'S VOYAGE D'ORIENT

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ABSTRACT.

Le Corbusier (1887–1965) had already explored, at an earlier stage in his career, the possibility of capturing architecture and the world through the filmic medium. One could argue that the relationship Le Corbusier had with film developed when he was a young man, when he was still Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, which would make an assessment of the importance of his 1911 *voyage d'Orient* meaningful. To a large extent the genesis of the complex relationship Le Corbusier was to establish later with architecture and with the world can be traced back to those travels; indeed, they should be seen as the very roots of his identity.

This paper sets out to understand the principles that may have nurtured Le Corbusier's future relationship with film. His like-mindedness with Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) and the acknowledgement by both of the cinematographic qualities of the Acropolis in Athens, justify the attention that subsequent thought has given to the series of drawings Jeanneret produced of the monument. But other drawings by him should also be mentioned in this context, particularly the one he made of a house in Istanbul. The movement that is perceived between each of the drawings of the Acropolis is counterposed by the movement that exists in the interior of this drawing, which presents architecture as if observed by a gaze that moves through time, discerning in it a *filmic montage* that pre-announces his future approximation to architecture.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationships that were established between architecture and film, an area of interest for the authors for some time now, both as an object of theoretical reflection and as a stimulus to the production of films dealing with architecture, provide the background for this paper.

The Modern Movement found very early on a natural accessory in film, and this was also explored by Le Corbusier (1867–1965) from an early stage onwards. Research into the relationship between his work and film has focussed primarily on observation of the notion of *promenade architecturale* and the rooting of that notion in the movement of the body within the space, but the deeper reach of the notion of montage, which is intrinsic to film and which the experience of his architecture challenges one to consider, is yet to be explored. This paper proposes a revisit of *voyage d'Orient*, a journey Le Corbusier, when he still went by the name of Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, made in 1911. It studies the form chosen to register the space-time relationship, and how one of the drawings in his *Carnets* reveals itself to be a pre-announcement of the montage, which was to characterise his body of work, and which should be clearly identified at the level of the structuring of the architectural object and not merely in defining the sequence of spaces. The purpose of documenting the Modern Movement is also achieved through the possibility of establishing new readings of what emerges at the roots of the architecture.

2. "THE EYE BECOMES CONFUSED"

"The eye becomes confused, a little perturbed by this kaleidoscopic cinema where dance the most dizzying combinations of colors".¹

Charles-Édouard Jeanneret — who, from 1920 onwards, confronted the world under the name of Le Corbusier — thus described a parade he witnessed in Vienna in 1911 for *Blumentag*, Flower Day, on his journeys which were to later become known as the *Voyage d'Orient*. For the young Jeanneret, film thus emerged as quite a powerful image, one that could well be used to evoke the experience of reality. In the dazzling tone of the description it is necessary to recognise a filmic approximation to reality.

Le Corbusier took an interest in cinema early on; it derived from his fascination with the machine, which was simultaneously a defining element and a manifest expression of modernity. Film achieved the possibility of registering reality and returning it impregnated with movement, thus accomplishing what photography could only suggest. It is possible to recognise in his conceptualisation of architecture as the concretisation of the notion of the *promenade architecturale* a complicity with the medium of film, that conceptualisation including the conception of architecture based on movement of the body within a space. But it is also pertinent to see the presence of film in Le Corbusier's approximation to architecture as something more radical. This is suggested, first and foremost, by the very idea of the *promenade architecturale*, the reach of which surpasses that of the restricted understanding of the movement of bodies in a space, but also by some of Le Corbusier's written

thoughts, in which he reveals a more complex appraisal of film than a mere means of documenting his work and his proposed designs would reveal. In order to understand the approximation to architecture from a basis in film, the notion of montage in particular must be examined.

It is of interest to seek the first intuitions of this evocation of cinema in Le Corbusier's *voyage d'Orient*, as this voyage coincides precisely with the period in which Le Corbusier forged the relationship he was to establish with architecture and with the world.

3. ESPRIT DE VÉRITÉ

3.1. Esprit de Vérité

Understanding the presence of film in Le Corbusier's approximation to architecture calls for consideration of his written thoughts, even though the medium of film is referred to only in isolated cases therein. A staunch believer in modernity, Le Corbusier was associated with the elaboration of multiple filmic and audio-visual objects,² which he assumed as a means of affirmation of his work and his existence as a creator, but always in the condition of a certain exteriority in relation to those objects. In contrast, Le Corbusier always recognised writing as the direct means of affirmation of his ideas.

Le Corbusier expressed his understanding of film in the text "Esprit de vérité" [Spirit of Truth] from 1933,³ his only writing that specifically dealt with that subject matter. He proposed that film be recognised as an art form with its own worth, equivalent to painting, sculpture, literature, music and theatre. The tone is that of a manifesto, as is the case in many of his writings. Le Corbusier urges film to return to the truth, recognising the deceiving nature that characterised most of the films produced by the film industry. He says that he has done the same in relation to architecture.⁴ Architecture helps him to clarify film, in the end because everything is architecture, "that is, ordered or arranged according to proportions and the selection of proportions".⁵ He trusts in the lens, "[a] god's eye, demiurge",⁶ that can confront the spectator with what they cannot see with their own eyes. The relationship with reality is altered; it is intensified. The lens is cold and harsh; it allows one to see what truth there is in life and the world. It is also revealing. The lens proclaims the truth. Le Corbusier finds the inherent interest that film has in the possibility of reflecting the truth thus achieved. It is on the basis of this truth that film should be constructed. "Let us construct [the cinema] on these realities, on these truths: composition, balance, rhythm!"⁷

3.2. Influence of Eisenstein

In "Esprit de vérité" one can find an echo of the contact between Le Corbusier and Sergei Eisenstein (1899–1948) in 1928, on the occasion of the former's visit to Moscow. Le Corbusier had seen *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and parts of the then unfinished *The General Line*.⁸ In an interview with

Sovetskii ekran magazine he argued:

*Architecture and the cinema are the only two arts of our time. In my own work I seem to think as Eisenstein does in his films. His work is shot through with the sense of truth, and bears witness to the truth alone. In their ideas, his films resemble closely what I am striving to do in my own work.*⁹

It is significant that Le Corbusier gifted Eisenstein with a copy of his text *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, [The Decorative Art of Today] and that he wrote in the dedication that two of the chapters in the text expressed a call for truth that was analogous to what he recognised in the film director's work.¹⁰ When Eisenstein received Le Corbusier, he had his own copy of *Vers une architecture* [Toward an Architecture]. The view of film as an architectural art corresponds to the view of architecture as a cinematographic art.

For Le Corbusier, film and architecture should be nurtured by the same desire for truth, a truth that comes from the preciseness provided by order, whereby that order is rooted in the control of a system of internal relationships and gauged by the sensibility of the gaze. It is the gaze that is the measure of everything, in architecture and in film.

Whilst Le Corbusier makes no explicit reference to this, his understanding of film seems to be based on the underlying notion of montage, that the montage is decisive in the concretisation of the 'composition', 'balance' and 'rhythm' that engender the truth of film. Here too, in this notion of montage, one can identify echoes of his meeting with Eisenstein. Eisenstein only finished his own essay "Montage and Architecture"¹¹ in the late 1930s, but montage had already been the subject matter of some of his earlier texts — e.g., "The Montage of Attractions" of 1923,¹² which was published around the same time as *Vers une Architecture*, and "The Montage of Film Attractions" of 1924.¹³ In any case, *Battleship Potemkin* was, in itself, a eulogy to montage.

4. VOYAGE D'ORIENT

4.1. Filmic Intuition

Let us return to *voyage d'Orient* and revisit Jeanneret's description of the parade in Vienna. The filmic approximation to reality recognised therein justifies the consideration of an intuition, one that was possibly also filmic, in the way that Jeanneret appropriated architecture. In 1911 cinema did not yet have the impact it was to have a decade later, but its presence amongst the public was already quite significant. Jeanneret unquestionably came into contact with film and the cinema before setting out on his *voyage d'Orient*. Cinema was already a common phenomenon in Vienna, Paris and Berlin, where he lived for periods of time. The fact that he had been taking photographs since at least 1907 and purchased a new camera in 1911,¹⁴ which indeed he was to use on his travels, confirmed his enthusiasm for the possibilities of capturing the world that were provided by modernity.



Fig. 1. Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, house in Istanbul, Turkey, 1911 (FLC Carnet voyage Orient 2, 68-69). © FLC / ADAGP, 2020.

Jeanneret's filmic intuition in his appropriation of architecture emerged in his travel *carnets*, his sketches of the Acropolis in Athens and his drawings of a house in Istanbul. This was an intuition, not a volition, and least of all a conscious volition; but it was an intuition that only manifested itself in isolated cases. Assessing said intuition requires the learning of architecture produced by a body in movement and, above all, the way that that learning is fixed in and by the drawing.

4.1.1. THE ASCENT TO THE ACROPOLIS

The ascent to the Acropolis was registered in a series of drawings in *Carnet 3*.¹⁵ Jeanneret focused on his passage through the Propylaea. The drawings reveal the sequence of his progression through the monument: an axial view of the Propylaea from the bottom of the steps; climbing the steps, looking to the left and to the right, at the silhouette of the Temple of Athena Nike against the horizon; a view of the

Parthenon from between the columns of the Propylaea. The origins of this appropriation in motion of the ascent to the Acropolis can be traced to *Histoire de l'Architecture* [The History of Architecture] by Auguste Choisy (1841–1909), which was published in 1899, four years after the first film projections by the Lumière brothers, Auguste (1862–1954) and Louis (1864–1948). Le Corbusier was even to use some of Choisy's drawings in *Vers une Architecture*, including some of the Acropolis. In *Histoire de l'Architecture*, approximation to the Acropolis is described as a cumulative sequence of vistas that are offered to the observer along a course. The description is accompanied by a set of images that urge the reader to imagine themselves in motion. The filmic perception of architecture was, as Bois argues,¹⁶ a constant concern of Choisy's, for whom axonometry, the preferred form of architectural representation, was, as Bois also affirms, "a mode of enunciating virtual movement".¹⁷ Choisy's description and images were, of course, later featured by Eisenstein in "Mon-

tage and Architecture”, to which a reading of *Vers une Architecture* unquestionably contributed. “[I]t is hard to imagine a montage sequence for an architectural ensemble more subtly composed, shot by shot, than the one that our legs create by walking among the buildings of the Acropolis”, Eisenstein was to declare.¹⁸

4.1.2. A HOUSE IN ISTANBUL

The house in Istanbul is featured in *Carnet 2* (Fig. 1).¹⁹ Jeanneret made a drawing of the courtyard, alongside a façade elevation and a schematic plan. The written notes refer to the proximity of the house to the Nuruosmaniye Mosque.

The drawing of the courtyard is of particular interest here. Despite the appearance of a view elaborated proceeding from a fixed point, in this case the entrance, one discovers the coexistence of various views based on several different points along a course around the courtyard, the course outlined in the schematic plan that accompanies the drawing. The axial view of the entrance gallery on the left, and the frontal view of the upper floors overlooking the courtyard on the right, are not compatible with one single take on the space. There is a similar incompatibility between the fact that the observer of the gallery would seem to be on a level with the lower level of the arches on the right and the fact that those arches seem to be seen from a higher level, perhaps that of the raised platform that comes after the entrance. The reference to the kaleidoscope in the description of the parade in Vienna is of particular pertinence here, as this drawing conjugates a diversity of drawings.

4.2. A Montage Within a Drawing

Both the drawings of the Acropolis and the drawing of the courtyard of the house in Istanbul have an underlying sense of the learning of architecture by a body in movement, thus giving them a filmic dimension, the singularity of which must be underlined. But there is a distinction between the two that must also be observed: the way in which they incorporate the time inherent in their underlying movement. Whilst, in the ascent to the Acropolis, which was elaborated as a succession of moments, the passage of time emerges as an implied element between each of the drawings, in the Istanbul house, the time of the movement is redefined as it is compressed into a single drawing, whereby any possible linearity is forfeited for the sake of simultaneity — that which comes from the coexistence of differing gazes. One can see in this drawing a montage, one that shows the roots of Jeanneret’s filmic intuition. Bois’ remarks are particularly pertinent here:

The Acropolis of Athens was at stake. The notes Choisy devoted to it give a magnificent picture of the construction and the computation of such a montage from the point of view of a moving spectator. But if the spectator cannot move, he has together in one unique point the elements of that which is dis-

*persed in reality, unseizable to a single gaze, scattered about, but which the author must absolutely juxtapose, for it is in taking in all these elements that the spectator will obtain an impression of the object or — moreover — the impression which the author wishes to induce in transforming the relationships of reality, that which he wants to inscribe for the perception. Cinematographic montage is, too, a means to “link” in one point — the screen — various elements (fragments) of a phenomenon filmed in diverse dimensions, from diverse points of view and sites.*²⁰

5. A FILMIC MONTAGE

It is of interest to ask what the influence of the notion of montage in Le Corbusier’s thought was.

For Le Corbusier, although they were ‘the only two arts of our time’, as he himself said, architecture and film were separate and distinct. But that distinction, which goes some way to making the subordination of the film *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui* (1930) by Pierre Chenal (1904–1990) to the Villa Savoye more explicit, does not invalidate the appreciation Le Corbusier had for film, particularly its creative dimension. It is that dimension that he recognised in his praise of the work of Maya Deren (1917–1961), and which he endeavoured to explore in the small private films he made, even if they were never developed.²¹ In Le Corbusier, the connection between architecture and film must be seen at the level of their respective constitutive forms, i.e., at the level of the structuring of their objects — architectural and filmic; at the point where the time and space relationships capable of moving those who confront them are generated. Finally, it is as a *machine à émouvoir* that architecture, as a concretisation of the *promenade architecturale*, should be understood. It is that singular approach to architecture that the drawing of the house in Istanbul pre-announces, by permeating the spatial composition with the element of time. Could that perhaps be the reach of the notion of montage in Le Corbusier’s thought.

Is the Chandigarh Capitol in India a revisitation of the Acropolis in Athens? Is the Capitol Le Corbusier’s ultimate montage?

6. CONCLUSION

Acknowledging Le Corbusier’s interest in film, this paper revisits the *voyage d’Orient* of 1911, and seeks to identify in it the emergence of the future relationship between film and his work. By reconfiguring the capturing of space by means of time manipulation, the drawing of a house in Istanbul reveals the intuition of a montage of cinematographic value that serves as a pre-announcement of the montage that is at the root of Le Corbusier’s architecture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, MIT Press, 1989, 26. The chapter on Vienna in *Journey to the East* was originally published as two articles in the *Feuille d'Avis* de La Chaux-de-Fonds on 18 and 25 August 1911. The description of the *Blumentag* parade appears in the first of the two articles.
- 2 Boone identified more than 200 cinematographic and television documents by and on Le Corbusier between 1919 and 1965, including projects that were never realised and films that have since been lost. Veronique Boone, *Le Corbusier et le cinéma : la communication d'une œuvre*, PhD diss., Université Charles de Gaulle – Lille III; Université libre de Bruxelles, 2. Catalogue, 2017, 262–227, accessed on January 26, 2020, https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-02426192/file/BOONE_Veronique_Annexes_1.pdf.
- 3 Le Corbusier, "Spirit of Truth", *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, Berkley, University of California Press, 2014, 41–43; *Esprit de vérité* was originally published in *Mouvement* magazine, issue No. 1, a French publication specialising in cinema. Le Corbusier, "Esprit de vérité", *Mouvement* (1), 1933, 10–13, accessed on January 31, 2020, https://monoskop.org/images/7/7a/Mouvement_1_Jun_1933.pdf.
- 4 The book *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui*, published in 1925, contains a chapter titled *Esprit de vérité*, in which Le Corbusier urges architecture to return to the truth. Le Corbusier, "The sense of truth", *The Le Corbusier: the Decorative Art of Today*, London, The Architectural Press, 1987, 165–184.
- 5 Le Corbusier, "Spirit of Truth", *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, Berkley, University of California Press, 2014, 41.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid. In the English translation the architectural dimension of the elaboration of film that is present in the original French phrase 'Que l'on architecture', and which is to an extent concordant with the affirmation that everything is architecture, is lost.
- 8 *The General Line* was finished in 1929, when it took on the new title of *The Old and the New*.
- 9 Le Corbusier cited in Jean-Louis Cohen, *Le Corbusier and the Mystique of the USSR: Theories and Projects for Moscow, 1928–1936*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, 48–49.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Sergei Eisenstein, Yve-Alain Bois, Michael Glenny, "Montage and Architecture", *Assemblage* (10), 1989, 111–131, accessed on February 15, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3171145>.
- 12 Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions", *S. M. Eisenstein Selected Works, Vol. I Writings, 1922–34*, London, BFI Publishing, 1988, 33–38, accessed on February 15, 2020, https://monoskop.org/images/9/93/Eisenstein_Sergei_Selected_Works_Volume_I_Writings_1922-34.pdf.
- 13 Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions", *S. M. Eisenstein Selected Works, Vol. I Writings, 1922–34*, London, BFI Publishing, 1988, 39–58. Retrieved from: https://monoskop.org/images/9/93/Eisenstein_Sergei_Selected_Works_Volume_I_Writings_1922-34.pdf.
- 14 Tim Benton, *LC FOTO: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer*, Baden, Lars Müller Publishers, 2013, 24.
- 15 Le Corbusier, "Carnet 3", *Voyage d'Orient : Carnets*, Milan, Mondadori, 2002, 106–115.
- 16 Yve-Alain Bois on the Introduction of Montage and Architecture. Sergei Eisenstein, Yve-Alain Bois, Michael Glenny, "Montage and Architecture", *Assemblage* (10), 1989, 114, accessed on February 20, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3171145>.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Sergei Eisenstein, Yve-Alain Bois, Michael Glenny, "Montage and Architecture", *Assemblage* (10), 1989, 117, accessed on February 20, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3171145>.
- 19 Le Corbusier, "Carnet 2", *Voyage d'Orient : Carnets*. Milan, Mondadori, 2002, 68–69.
- 20 Yve-Alain Bois on the Introduction of Montage and Architecture. Sergei Eisenstein, Yve-Alain Bois, Michael Glenny, "Montage and Architecture", *Assemblage* (10), 1989, 111, accessed on February 20, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3171145>.
- 21 Tim Benton, *LC FOTO: Le Corbusier Secret Photographer*, Baden, Lars Müller Publishers, 2013.

