Le Corbusier, Atget, and Versailles

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#03

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**Le Corbusier, Atget,
and Versailles.**

1. (frontispiece) Versailles, One Hundred Steps. "Et c'est pour avoir vu Versailles sans comprendre ..." From *Une maison-un palais*. ©FLC/SPA, 2012

2. Jeanneret, 1904. ©FLC/SPA, 2012.

Within an issue devoted to travelling and learning, it can be argued that hiking uphill was the first travelling experience of Ch-E. Jeanneret: it was a regular activity in his hometown, his father was a mountaineer, and the drawing classes of the School of Arts often took place in the Jura Mountains. The encounter with the vast horizons after a contrived ascent synthesizes the experience, which Jeanneret repeatedly drew. Several watercolours depict the silhouette of distant ridges seen from the apex, sometimes hovering above the fog, and always conveying the sense of spatial depth by joining near and far in the pictorial plane. Deprived of humanity, they evoke, in the tradition of romantic painting, the overpowering nature, the timeless and the remote, i.e., the Sublime, as "anything which elevates the mind is sublime, and elevation of mind is produced by the contemplation of greatness of any kind" (Ruskin, 1862a, p.41-42).

Jeanneret's Ruskinian education led him to portray nature by introducing a certain degree of mystery through an "apparently uncertain execution." According to Ruskin (1862, 4: p.60), "a certain sort of indistinctness" is necessary to the highest art, "as all subjects have a mystery in them, so all drawing must have a mystery in it". Jeanneret explored some of the Ruskinian devices (1862b: p.53-55) to attain mystery, such as the effect of clouds or fog (e.g. FLC2202; FLC1905). For Ruskin (1862a, p.182-186), depth of space and mystery were also connected. Since the human eye is not capable of focusing objects at unequal distances at the same time, in painting either the foreground or the background should be sacrificed in order to express space. Jeanneret's juxtaposition of clearly defined backgrounds and unfocused foregrounds follows this argument (FLC2016v). Another method to achieve mystery stems from the "absolute infinity of things." One cannot see everything clearly, so "there is a continual mystery caused throughout all spaces of landscape." As one moves forwards, "the mystery has ceased to be in the whole things, and has gone into their details;" as one moves further, "the mystery has gone into a third place," and so forth (Ruskin, 1862b, p.55-56).

This argument embeds the idea of a temporal ordering of events to be found in some of Jeanneret's early works. A watercolour (fig. 2) defines two spaces, one preceding the white trunk and another in the middle ground beyond it. The bunch of receded dark red trunks defines a third area, beyond which one can easily feel that the ground falls away steeply revealing the horizon under the deep blue sky. The unfolding spaces are then enhanced by conveying a zigzag ascent. The white sloping ground and the higher density of the red trunks on the right, in counterpoint to the growing predominance of the sky on the opposite side, suggest that the view over the horizon takes place to the left, after the foliage in the foreground. The foliage draws a frame suggesting a threshold. Brought close to the ground on the left edge, it works as a pivot that induces the rotation towards left. In sum, reality is

rearranged to construct a narrative of unfolding views, in which mystery is attained by the implicit encounter with the sublime horizon at the top.

Another travelling experience is proposed by Le Corbusier's diorama of the *Ville Contemporaine* (fig. 3). The angled perspective seems to be done along the approach from a plane, depicting the moment at which the changing direction unveils the city centre and the axis pointing to the mountain in the background. The rhythm of the skyscrapers faintly rises above the ridge, preceded by the sequential planes of the setbacks (*lotissements à redents*). We are now in the realm of the machine, in which the body is no longer the standard of measurement.

Yet, the machine remains in the human realm, it "is conceived within the spiritual framework that we have constructed for ourselves [...] a framework that forms our tangible universe; this system, taken section by section from the world around us and in which we participate, is consistent enough to determine the creation of organs performing functions similar to the natural phenomena" (Le Corbusier, 1924). On one level, the geometric city, "cut with a precision of theory," competes with the overpowering nature and the emotions that it instils in us, bringing to mind "the most remote geometry, that of the Egyptians and the Greeks" (Le Corbusier, 1924). On another level, city and landscape are seen "with the mind with which the machine has endowed us." The airplane "provides a spectacle with a lesson – a philosophy. No longer a delight of the senses." (Le Corbusier, 1935).

Insofar geometry is concerned, Passanti (2008; 1987) has shown that the pyramidal composition of the plan rivalling with the ridge and its axes pointing to it relate to Charles Blanc's aesthetic category of the Sublime. For Blanc, the Sublime refers to the immeasurable and mysterious aspects of nature, which evoke infinity and the divine; to attain the Sublime, architecture must reproduce its most imposing characters by combining the grandeur and the absolute character of geometry, as in Egyptian architecture. As for the airplane, it provides a spiritual journey towards the Sublime. But Le Corbusier's perspectives, always deviated from the axes and slightly angled, suggest that it also entails a narrative that, somehow, it is connected with the senses: the airplane "is a new function added to our senses. It is a new standard of measurement. It is a new basis of sensation" (Le Corbusier, 1935). Like the winding paths crossing the orthogonal scheme of the setbacks, or the geometric envelopes of the villas of the 1920s, freely organized by "organs," the airplane explores a principle of space perception which extends back to the picturesque principles of sequential views within the grid. In its essence, it is the same experience that he portrayed in the Jura Mountains: a contrived journey that refers to the Sublime.

The contradiction underlying the attempt to reconcile a rational diagram and a pattern of emotional responses associated with it involves the kind of opposition that exists between classicism and romanticism,

3. Le Corbusier. *Ville Contemporaine*, 1904. Diorama. ©FLC/SPA, 2012

matter and spirit, rationalism and idealism, logic and intuition. While the process that mediates between Le Corbusier's early education and purist aesthetics is long and complex, I will focus on his first visits to Versailles to further explore this opposition. The first reason for implicating it in the paradox is that it marked Jeanneret's debut in the world of classicism, his drawings and photographs being an early manifestation of a picturesque approach to a Cartesian space. The second reason lies on the problem of the Sublime. The early visits to Versailles took place close to two main episodes that Passanti (2008, 2010) has pointed out as informing Jeanneret's association of Blanc's discussion on the Sublime with architecture. In 1907, he considered the dome of Brunelleschi only when he saw it at a distance dominating the silhouette of Florence, reading its geometry and grandeur rivalling with the surrounded hills as a manifestation of the Sublime. This revelation, Passanti has further argued, gave birth to Le Corbusier's long life obsessive research on the Sublime in architecture and urban planning. The second episode was in 1910, when a sudden passion for the straight street emerged within his Sittesque writings on urban design. Once more, Blanc allowed him to associate the straight street to the Sublime aspects of the "horizontal of the sea, the grandeur of endless plains, [or] the grandiosity of the Alps seen from a high peak."

In trying to uncover the roots of the association between the idea of a narrative and the manifestation of the Sublime through geometry, we come across a veiled clue by Le Corbusier. The first section of *Une maison-un palais* starts by an historical survey stressing the role of geometry in the relationship between nature and, on the other hand, architecture and urban planning. Then the focus shifts to the machine age and to an overview of his theories.¹ Between the two parts, Le Corbusier published a photograph of Versailles: "Et c'est pour avoir vu Versailles sans comprendre ..." Versailles is thus presented as a key experience of his intellectual journey, suggesting that it encompassed a concealed lesson. While Jeanneret's 1915 researches at the Bibliothèque National have been dwelt with (Bruculeri, 2002a; Duboy, 1987), I will try to unveil this lesson through some of his earlier drawings and photographs, suggesting the influence of the French photographer Eugène Atget in his early approach to Versailles.

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After the trip to Italy and a short sojourn in Vienna, Jeanneret moved to Paris in March 1908, remaining steadfast in his Ruskinian education. He started a part-time collaboration with Auguste Perret three months after, devoting the afternoons to study in the Beaux-Arts, public libraries and museums. He thought classicism to be decadent, and despite Perret's insistence he only visited Versailles on May 1909, during his parents' visit. He was nonetheless impressed by the parterres, the orangerie and the One Hundred Steps (Le Corbusier, 1932). The main impact must have been caused by the scale. Having Blanc in mind, he would not fail to notice how the man-made rivals with

nature, having returned there more than once to draw and photograph. When he returned to Paris, between December 1912 and January 1913, he repeatedly visited Versailles, again giving special attention to the orangerie and the One Hundred Steps (Brooks, 1997, p.346).

Some of his drawings and photographs have been seen as an interest in the buildings' means of reconciling differences in level. Also, the way the volumes of the palace advance and retreat has been read in the light of the principle of the setbacks (v. Moos, 2009, p.147, Brucculeri 2002b, p.162). This volumetric play can be related with the linear blocks of the Secretariat of the project for the Palace of the League of Nations, establishing a rhythm along the main axial access (Colquhoun, 1987). But while in the 1927 project it is the straight approach that assures the sense of the whole at the eye level, in 1909 Jeanneret insistently portrayed the orthogonal layout of Versailles in angular perspectives. He was neither ready to accept the rigid architectural geometry, nor to swap the Rousseauian myth evoked by the landscape gardens for the parterres and topiary defining alleys between "Cones, Globes, and Pyramids."² Backed by his medieval preferences and the unfolding views of picturesque design, he never depicted the infinity of Le Nôtre's axes or the palace's symmetrical composition.

An example is a photograph of the central body of the palace. The building is portrayed obliquely, the parterre conveying the sense of spatial depth (fig 4). In another photograph, the focus seems to shift to space (fig. 5).³ The sense of scale and spatial depth are achieved by joining near and far both in the vanishing rhythm of the ornamental vases and in the counterpoint between the foreground vase and the palace at a distance. But in avoiding an axial approach, the vase filling in the foreground results in a somewhat ambiguous composition. Unorthodox is also the perspective of the south wing of the palace, partially hidden behind the central body, the unlikely viewpoint of which seems to relate to a viewer in motion (fig. 6). Similarly, the oblique view of a watercolour done from the upper intermediate landing of the One Hundred Steps enfeebls the perception of the orthogonal layout (fig. 7). The depth relationships between the volumes and planes beyond the parterre of the orangerie are extended by the steps in the foreground, instilling the sense of discovery in the reader. More than the reconciling of differences in level, this watercolour suggests that Jeanneret looked at Versailles as a built landscape to be experienced in similar terms to those he used to draw back home.

The large majority of Jeanneret's drawings and photographs adopt similar principles: asymmetrical compositions, angular perspectives, partial views, and the juxtaposition of near and far, endow the images with the sense of spatial depth, convey the continuation of space beyond the frame, and impart the idea of unfolding views. This approach to classicism through a picturesque outlook has the latent idea of a Cartesian order freely apprehended in diagonal views embedded in it, as if walking along a virtual organic layout that overlays the geometric

4. Jeanneret. Versailles, 1909. Central body of the palace seen from the south parterre. Also, see FLC L4(19)48 ©FLC/SPA, 2012

5. Jeanneret. Versailles, August 1909. South parterre. ©FLC/SPA, 2012

6. Jeanneret. Versailles, 1909. South wing.
©FLC/SPA, 2012

7. Jeanneret. Versailles, 1909. Orangerie and
One Hundred Steps. This view was retaken in two
additional watercolours: FLC1919, undated, and
FLC4087, 1912. ©FLC/SPA, 2012

scheme. While we can recognize this conflation of distinct orders in Le Corbusier's work from the 1920s onwards, at this early stage he was trying to decipher his seduction for the grandeur of Versailles through his Romantic background. In his interpretative quest, he probably devoted some of his study afternoons to it, becoming acquainted with the extensive iconography that was available by the time.

One of the main contemporary photographers of Paris was Atget. He earned his living selling his work for tourists, antiquarians, booksellers, or public libraries. Intended to serve as source material for their work, he took up documentation for a broad sort of artists, from architects to illustrators and painters. Eugène Grasset, for instance, who Jeanneret had personally met at his arrival in Paris, was among his clients. His commissions included a wide range of themes, from architecture (ornamental facades, details, etc) to urban scenes. French gardens were among his favourite subjects. He photographed Versailles, Saint-Cloud and Sceaux over many years. As part of a larger campaign to preserve Old Paris, Georges Cain, the Chief Curator of the Musée Carnavalet, bought six hundred of Atget's photographs in 1905, creating "The Decorative Arts as applied to Construction in Old Paris." In 1906, Marcel Poète, chief librarian at the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, chose Atget to update the photographic collection of Parisian scenes dating back to the middle of the nineteenth century, enlarging the collection of Atget's images which already ascended to more than 2500. Widely disseminated, in 1909 his work could also be found in institutions such as the Musée Éthnographique du Trocadéro, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Bibliothèque National de France, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, or École des Beaux-Arts (Hambourg, 1983, Nesbit, 1992).⁴

Even if unaware of its authorship, Jeanneret's medievalist leanings may have led him to Atget's photographic survey of Old Paris. He also had easy access to Atget's images of Versailles in the libraries and museums he used to frequent, and in regular printings, such as postcards.⁵ The work of Atget suited Jeanneret's proclivities. Unlike most architectural photographers, for whom it was paramount to achieve the regularity and frontality of elevation drawings, Atget rejected a static, symmetrical balance to embrace non-classical asymmetrical compositions. Deprived of human figures, angled views of vanishing streets, glimpses into courtyards, banisters with the stairs disappearing behind a wall or developing beyond the frame, or architectural facades with doors intentionally left open or ajar, suggest a narrative of unfolding spaces which leaves the reader dangling. If Jeanneret researched into Atget's work, he also may have become aware of another of his uncommon procedures. As pointed out by Hambourg (1983, p.15), Atget's method of documenting a thing generally followed the logical unfolding of visual experience, tracing his path of discovery. This resulted in a sequence of frames which "progressed from far to near, from the whole to part, and from exterior to interior." Such fact Jeanneret could relate both with Ruskin and Rodolphe Töpffer.⁶

The commissions to portray ornament and statuary took Atget to Versailles. He did not separate the utilitarian purpose of his work from his personal artistic interpretation, as Hambourg has also argued, and his photographs gradually became a pictorial problem of space representation. He started to off-centre the ornamental motifs – statuary, pools, or balustrades – setting them against vanishing alleys, or twinning them with distant shapes and motifs (fig. 8). By centring them as a single subject, he raised space to the main subject of his work. The sense of spatial depth was amplified by joining near and far, the element in the foreground often being outsized by positioning the camera at a low vantage point at a short distance. In such viewpoints, graphically rich flights of steps enlivened vanishing perspectives, further contributing to the dynamism of the image (Hambourg, 1983; Barberie, 2005).

The influence of Atget in Jeanneret's approach to Versailles is first suggested by the comparison between the images of the south parterre. Looking at the composition, balance and sense of spatial depth of the one with the vase, it is tempting to postdate and attribute it to an influence of Atget. A similar argument can be held as to the inclusion of the pool and statue in a frame of the palace's south wing (fig. 9), resulting in a composition that resembles Atget's.⁷ Beyond the formalist concession, one senses a similar intuitive spatial recognition that pervades the majority of Jeanneret's drawings and photographs of Versailles. If Jeanneret could recognize in Atget his picturesque and Ruskinian background, the images of Versailles would provide him a non-classical approach capable of reconciling classicism and romanticism, operating more at the interpretative level than at an *artistic intention* level.

While Atget may also explain why, in an uncommon procedure, Jeanneret seems to have photographed Versailles more than he drew, we may ask why Le Corbusier chose an image of the One Hundred Steps to illustrate what he "saw without understanding." It does not concern space, and although it might be read as documenting the reconciling of differences in level by framing the supporting wall, this does not explain the concealed message in *Une maison-un palais*.

In a similar photograph (fig. 10), the off-centre vase and the oblique view suggest once more the aesthetic influence of Atget. The steps and the shadowy sloping path between the wall and the trees were judiciously isolated, twinning the theme of the ascending route. They find their common ground in the Ruskinian mystery that stems from the absolute infinity of things, the unfolding narrative associated with it, and the latent encounter with the sublime horizon. If the secondary path - in which mystery is emphasized by the lost of detail of the shadowy area - arguably fits the clichéd territory of the picturesque, the object-like character of the steps dominating the frame is definitely strange to it.

Affinities can be found with an image of Atget (fig. 11). Both show a flexibility of approach which is not identifiable in the geometry of the garden, both search infinity of space other than in Le Nôtre's axes by

8. Atget. Versailles, 1903. BnF

9. Jeanneret. Versailles, 1909. South wing, pool and statue. ©FLC/SPA, 2012

10. Jeanneret. Versailles, undated. One Hundred Steps. ©FLC/SPA, 2012

11. Atget. Versailles, 1903. One Hundred Steps. BnF

12. Atget. Saint-Cloud, 1904. BnF

13. Jeanneret. Rome, Villa Medici, 1911.
©FLC/SPA, 2012

adopting a low vantage point framing the steps against the sky; both suggest that the space extends beyond the stairs, leading the reader to wonder about what will happen atop; and both concentrate on an intermediate episode which articulates main spaces of the garden, dismissing a broad clarifying context. But whereas Atget placed the camera slightly angled at a distance, leaving an apron of the path at the base of the frame that imparts more openly the sense that space is easily inhabitable, Jeanneret's proximity, pointing the camera upwards, dramatizes the scale, the void on the top, and wrests the subject out of the context rendering it in a contrived independence.

The viewpoint recalls Atget's recurrent exploitation of backlit flights of steps shoot from below and the metaphoric dimension of light associated with it (fig. 12). Hamburg (1983, p. 18-19) has pointed out that, in his evolution from visual report to metaphorical discourse, Atget gradually started to emphasize the drama between nature and architecture in his 1906 photographs of Saint-Cloud, drawing force a new vision of Versailles. "Accompanied by the technical innovation of shooting directly into the light ... the flaring radiance [of his images] so aptly suggested the presence of immaterial forces that the luminous effect became associatively linked with Nature's mysteries." Szarkowski (1983, p. 162), on the other hand, has suggested that the simplicity of one of his last photographs of Saint-Cloud is the natural conclusion of a long sequence of pictures, for it "came finally to consider the meaning of the horizon".

In general terms, the sense of mystery that permeates Atget's images partially stems from over and underexposure, be it in the glimpses into dim spaces, or in the vanishing alleys of gardens defined by underexposed masses of trees set against the lit sky. This recalls Ruskin (1862, 4: 53-60) who, while discussing mystery in painting, compared an "uncertain execution" with contrasted photographs. The lost of detail in over and underexposed areas, he argued, endows the photograph with mystery in a process equivalent to that of the chiaroscuro. The consideration of the horizon and the link between overexposure and Nature's mysteries, often contrasting against intriguing underexposed areas, fitted well Jeanneret's set of concerns, and may explain his subsequent obsession for portraying backlit staircases from below (fig.13), an aspect also discussed by Benton (forthcoming).

If Jeanneret may have borrowed Atget's outlook to solve the conflict between classicism and romanticism, Atget may have also helped him to comprehend the nature of the medium. Inevitably aware of the impossibility for the photographer to rearrange reality in order to render an idea, Jeanneret perceived that he could decide what to include within the frame, the vantage point from which to look at the content, and the relationships that were to be activated between the elements isolated in that segment of reality. More importantly, he intuitively understood that, although incapable of narrative, photography could operate at the metaphoric and symbolic levels. And in these fields, the "theatrical

backdrop quality” of Atget’s exploitation of “the melancholy void” (Adams, 1979, p. 15-21)⁸ and the drama between the natural and the man-made are uncommonly rich when compared to his contemporaries.

Exploring the possibilities of the medium, Jeanneret’s precise camera positioning and framing of the One Hundred Steps brings the *poiesis* of Atget into the realm of his concerns. Through the close, angled, and low viewpoint, the One Hundred Steps transmuted into a mountain, a pyramid set against the lit sky, embodying the metaphor of a contrived ascent uphill and the experience of the Sublime associated with it, and, on the other hand, enlivening its object-like character to imprint in it the symbolism of the grandeur and geometry. Because the steps bring together this dual evocation - the ascending narrative and geometry -, the photograph published in *Une maison-un palais* could dismiss the secondary path, reinforcing the narrative by framing the threshold defined between two tree-like stones thrusting upwards. Both frames are simultaneously a representation of the horizon in *absentia* and an evocation of the architectural ontology - the Egyptian pyramid rivalling with the grandeur of nature - meeting in the notion of a built landscape.

Quoted out of context, the One Hundred Steps opens the experience of the Sublime to the level of universal value. In so doing, it could be elevated to the symbol of Le Corbusier’s intellectual journey and of a new architecture that entails a spiritual journey through geometry and nature.

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Beyond backlit staircases shoot from below, some of Jeanneret’s photographs of the *Voyage d’Orient* further suggest the influence of Atget, either in off-centre motifs (e.g. FLC L4-19-128) or flights of steps graphically explored by positioning the camera low to the ground (fig. 14), always pursuing the sense of spatial depth. Interesting is also the oblique view with the pool in the foreground of Jeanneret’s 1910 watercolour of Sanssouci. It particularly recalls the 1923 images of Saint-Cloud’s Grande Cascade by Atget, revealing the common roots of both approaches. But the connection between another frame of the One Hundred Steps and some of Jeanneret’s 1911 photographs, suggests that he also looked at Versailles through the lessons of the *Voyage d’Orient* (fig. 15).⁹ This time he adopted a lower vantage point, suppressed the intervening orangerie, and depicted a weightless cubic volume hovering above the parapet, keeping the flight of steps in the foreground. Clearly influenced by the experiences of Pisa and the Acropolis, he shifted to the theme of the oblique, ascending approach to an abstract geometric volume with its axis pointing to the immeasurable and mysterious nature.

14. Jeanneret. Vatican, 1911. Bibliothèque de la Ville de la Chaux-de-Fonds, Fonds Le Corbusier ©FLC/SPA, 2012

15. Versailles. One Hundred Steps. From *La Ville Radieuse*. ©FLC/SPA, 2012

1 → The book - a defense of his project for the Palace of the League of Nations - is divided into three sections. The second section is devoted to the project and the third is a critique of the competition.

2 → Thacker (1979, p.182) quoted Joseph Addison (1672-1719), who criticized the French formal garden for offering “Cones, Globes, and Pyramids” instead of “an Orchard in Flower.”

3 → With the exception of a square photograph (fig. 5), which holds the handwritten date of August 1909 by Le Corbusier, the remaining photographs were dated by the Fondation Le Corbusier archive. By that time Jeanneret already owned a Cupido 80, with which he could use plates with square and rectangular formats.

4 → Nesbit includes a dated record of Atget’s sales to the Parisian institutions between 1898 and 1928, and a list of other public and private clients, although not complete.

5 → A limited research on Atget’s work has shown that, among Jeanneret’s postcards of Versailles, there is at least one by Atget (FLC L5-7-272), which is a cropped photograph of La Cour de Marbre dated from 1903 (BNF - Est. Eo 109b bte 24).

Another source might have been Poëte’s exhibitions and publications on the history of Paris from 1907 onwards. Poëte would become an essential source for Jeanneret’s 1915 researches at the Bibliothèque Nationale, and in the 1920s both men would be in steady contact (Bruculeri, 2002a, p. 99-100; Duboy, 1987).

6 → Töpffer, whose work Jeanneret knew, was a nineteenth century Swiss illustrator whose work anticipates the “comic strip” (v. Moos, 2002, p.23-43).

7 → Examples are abundant. See, for instance, BnF-Est. Eo 109b bte24.

8 → The melancholy of Atget’s photographs has been often related to his own personality. Also prone to solitude and melancholy, Jeanneret could easily sense the tone of Atget’s images of “empty gardens” and cityscapes.

9 → The similarities with some of the 1911 photographs are related to the change in the approach to the photographic image that took place during the *Voyage d’Orient* (Rabaça, 1911), suggesting that this image was probably taken in 1912-13. It was later published next to one photograph of the Parthenon and one of Pisa in *La Ville radieuse* (Le Corbusier, 1964, p.139). For two images by Atget published in the same book see p.100, 103. Atget was by then internationally acclaimed, well known in the Parisian artistic milieu, and his work had been used by Man Ray and the surrealists.

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