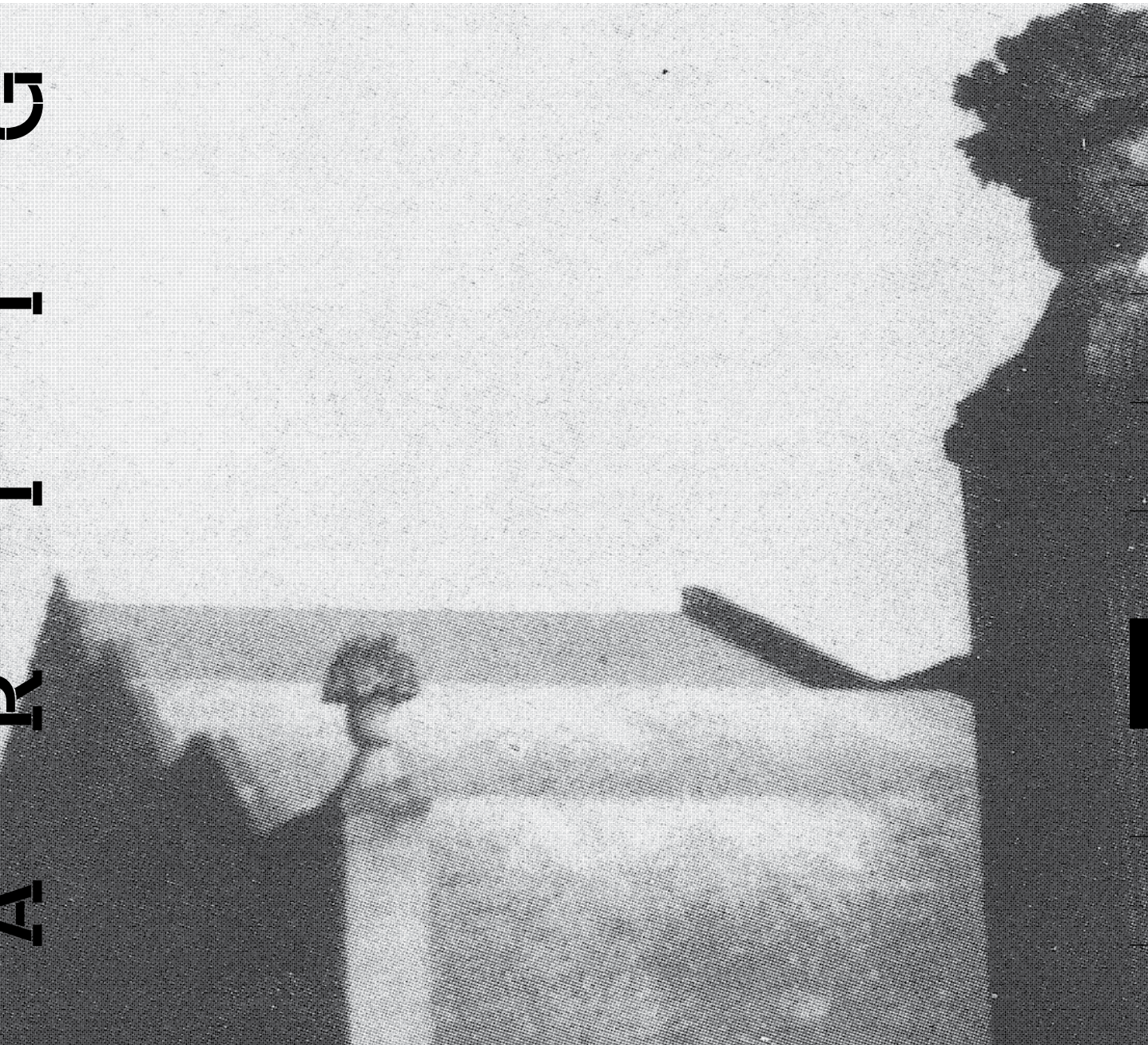
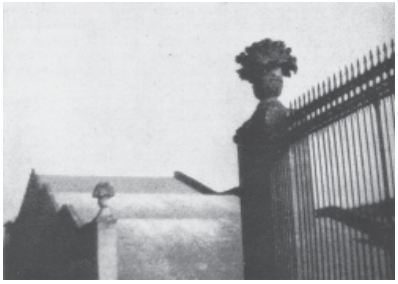
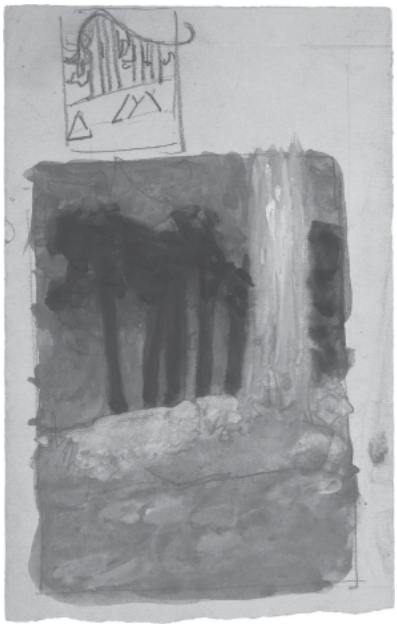
Armando Rabaça

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.

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

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,