

The Voyage Piece by David Bergé - Two-hundred and eighty-six photographs: this is the treasure trove unearthed by David Bergé in the archives of the Fondation Le Corbusier at La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland. Thin glass plates which, so far mostly unknown, recount a visual chronicle of Charles-Edouard Jeanneret's and August Klipstein's 1911 *Grand Tour*: an adventurous voyage to Europe's mythical "Orient" and South, an experience, as it was later described, both Apollonian and Dionysian.

It took Jeanneret nearly five decades, and the "metamorphosis" into Le Corbusier – the 20th century's most influential architect – to eventually publish his travel journal as *Le Voyage d'Orient*. Fifty more years were necessary to bring to light the photographs the two young men took during that trip. From the very beginning, it seems that *time* somehow was shifted, displaced, delayed, and the several layers of this seminal event of modern cultural history were to be separated: *time* was disjointed.

Bergé's installation, *The Voyage Piece*, reflects this asynchronous, curved nature of time: the images are projected in triptychs, alluding to a "simultaneous" vision transcending the fixed perspective behind the single picture. There is no storytelling behind the way these are displayed, no fixed sequence, rather a full concentration on the photograph in its entirety, as physical witness of a past event and not only its two-dimensional representation.

That the observer is meant to grasp the images in their spatiality is implicit in the way the projections are cast onto the screens, but also fold to occupy the floor: a "rough" simulation of real space is thus created, immersing the viewer in a sort of photographic liquid he must partake of. Yet the original plates are displayed un-cropped, revealing cracked and torn margins, dark spots, burnt areas: a multiplicity of imperfections. David Bergé shows us the plates simultaneously as *objects* and as *spaces*, thus covering in one move the entire phenomenological gamut of photography.

The Voyage, Le Corbusier's only book originally lacking any illustration, showing neither drawings nor photographs, could only stimulate the imagination of readers: what exactly was the architect looking at during his seven months of traveling? What did the persons he described look like? Which was the configuration of villages, buildings, artwork, landscapes?

The photographs which have emerged from the archives can only tell a part of the story. Some places the two men visited are thoroughly depicted;

others – such as Venice or Pisa – only appear once. Jeanneret and Klipstein shared a single camera: with the exception of the few photographs where either or both of them appear, we cannot exactly tell whose eye lies behind the viewfinder. This uncertainty, however, makes the story conveyed by the pictures even more intriguing.

There is little technical expertise in the plates: neither Jeanneret nor Klipstein were experienced photographers, and since they did not carry a tripod, the hand-held camera often provided blurred images at best, focusing on the background while leaving the foreground in a misty haze. Many are over-exposed, others mysteriously dark. In several cases, the same plate is exposed twice, layering the images in a transparent, quasi-cubist fashion.

What is also quite striking is the substantial absence of a *project* behind the photographs: no *fil rouge* connecting them, they seem more like “bundles” of images haphazardly placed together. There are some objects which evidently the two men loved to observe: graveyards, stairs, doors, statues and bas-reliefs, landscapes and views of urban spaces; yet all are concocted in a medley which is truly difficult to categorize in any way. Strangely enough, we could *expect more* from Jeanneret, who later in his career would always be extremely focused and relentlessly dedicated to his vocation and, already in his early 20’s, was consistently piling up evidence pointing to his stature as a genius.

Jeanneret appears in just a few photographs, and only in one can his visage be clearly discerned, although the picture is again out of focus. We distinctly recognize his intense, “hungry” gaze, one that would eventually become an iconic face of the 20th century, ending up on banknotes and T-shirts. But we would be wrong in seeking in this young man the mere anticipation of the modernist, Promethean Le Corbusier, who preached the “Revolution through Architecture”. Read under this light, the 286 photographs make little or no sense: we cannot search for Le Corbusier before Le Corbusier’s *time* had actually come.

Although the images do not all point in one clear direction, there is nevertheless little randomness behind them. We sense a distinct effort in each shot, an effort of both a conceptual and physical nature, something digital technology has made us all but forget. And every single photograph, despite (or perhaps thanks to) its technical imperfection, creates an atmosphere of primitive authenticity, of an archaic world emerging through layers and layers of *time*.

Is this sensation something *we* alone experience, or could it have been part of the two men's perception as well? Traveling South and East from the center of Europe – and of modernity – Jeanneret was seeking the mythical dimension, the pre-modern roots of his own Mediterranean fascination. Voices still unspoiled by the all-reducing mark of the modern world were what Jeanneret and Klipstein sought: and these they found in the decaying cities and villages of the Ottoman Empire, through which they traveled just shortly before its ultimate dissolution.

We could argue that when looking, one can only find what he is already looking for. The two men's decision of undertaking an unusual – and not entirely riskless – trip across the Balkans was certainly propelled by an urge to seek “the other”, that original and primitive state of mankind which so much intrigued artists and intellectuals in the early years of the 20th century. And this “primitive” they recognized in the rough-cut engraving of a Muslim gravestone, the tattered robes of Orthodox monks, or a lime-washed wall overgrown by vegetation. Between these “incidental encounters” are scattered vestiges of the Mediterranean's classical past, from the Acropolis to the eye of the Pantheon and Pompeii, or the magnificence of Europe's Baroque age.

How well could Jeanneret and Klipstein grasp the complexity of the cultural landscape they were traveling through? Could they see the layers of *time* naturally piled one upon the other? Was their camera capable of piercing through these layers? No simple answer can be given for these questions, since all we have are the photographs themselves, surfacing from a century-long sleep: but through *The Voyage Piece* David Bergé tries to provide us with a vantage point from which to make our own observations. It's all about *time*, and of what 286 mute, poignant images can tell us of it.

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