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ORDER IS
ORDER IS
ORDER

Daniela Ortiz dos Santos

«L'esprit qui anime la nature est un esprit d'ordre; nous apprenons à le savoir. L'homme agissant (obligé d'agir différencie ce qu'il voit de ce qu'il apprend ou sait.»

Le Corbusier,
«L'Ordre» in «L'Esprit Nouveau 18», 1923.

Much has been written with respect to the different positions and theories Le Corbusier evidenced in his notes, articles and books.¹ Nevertheless, Le Corbusier's most dogmatic and straightforward ideas have not ceased to be a theme discussed within the architectural field. Also, very often Le Corbusier's arguments, widely reproduced, were labeled as homogenized and universal statements of the modern movement. This is what the present paper is built on – a tension between Le Corbusier's doctrine and his more subtle and obscure arguments produced in the twenties.²

In fact, several authors have endeavored to rupture the «myth» and give a voice to Le Corbusier «man», as controversial, dubious or errant.³ In agreement with this later approach, I argue that Le Corbusier's notion of «order» was multiple and fluid. In this sense, words and ideas are not understood as «unembodied notions», since their meanings are shaped between an individual and a socio-historical attribution of meanings in everyday life expressions.⁴

«Order» is not only a very frequent word in Le Corbusier's vocabulary, but also one of the most complex and perhaps controversial terms for the architect. Between 1920 and 1930, the period of his «most doctrinaire» discourse, Le Corbusier would have written eight books and several articles; and, in a great part of them, he resorted to this subject. By taking a closer look at Le Corbusier's texts, one may notice that such a term seems not always to embody similar content. Rather, its meaning and format appear to be often reinterpreted and reformulated. These formulations would also vary according to their purpose and specific platforms in which they had been presented.

In «Sur la plastique»,⁵ Le Corbusier and Ozenfant consider that «le besoin d'ordre» is men's highest need. If, on one hand, Le Corbusier suggests order as a metaphor spiritual needs of men – presented in «Sur la plastique»; on the other hand, in the article «L'Ordre»,⁶ the use appears even more pragmatic and formalistic.

He attributes the term as an image, as a counterpoint to the «visual disorders» of the map of Paris. It is not my intention to form an exhaustive description of such a term presented by Le Corbusier. The objectives here are rather modest, primarily to draw attention to a non-homogeneous meaning of «order» in «Précisions»⁷, the book published after traveling for the first time to South America.⁸ In addition to this, I argue that in this same publication, Le Corbusier would already indicate an idea of order less positivist as well as more poetic in its terms if compared to his previous texts. Despite becoming evident in Le Corbusier's paintings, photos and further writings through the 1930s, such an understanding would not be immediately incorporated into his practice as an architect.

It is no news to say that the trip to South America in 1929 affected Le Corbusier. Several authors have already drawn attention to it.⁹ On numerous occasions Le Corbusier himself seems to declare it. For instance, in the introduction of the book «Précisions», he considers the series of lectures as the result of experienced moments of «sharp lucidity, of crystallization of his thoughts», an opportunity to express himself so «fully» that he «had never before».¹⁰ He continues, «When you are at your daily work, you are not forced to make such instantaneous crystallizations».¹¹ Furthermore, once organizing his «Oeuvre Complète», Le Corbusier establishes the year of 1929 as a breaking moment in his work.¹² Nevertheless, studies and debates which have focused upon a vocabulary problematized by Le Corbusier's architectural and artistic work at this time are far from over.

«From the plane I saw sights that one may call cosmic. What an invitation to meditation, what a reminder of the fundamental truths of our earth!»

Le Corbusier,
«American Prologue» in «Précisions», p.4.

December 1929, it is «full midsummer» under the equator. The oceanliner «Lutetia» widens its distance from the Brazilian coast towards Europe while Le Corbusier writes these words from a luxury cabin of the ship. Not only does Le Corbusier consider it important to register such experiences and discoveries during his South American trip, but to place them as the introduction and the closing chapter of «Précisions», whose main body refers to his conferences held in Buenos Aires. His words cited above

fig. 073

*L'Ordre in L'Esprit Nouveau, L'EN 18.
Paris, 1923.
Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris.*



were taken from the ‘American Prologue’, the introductory chapter which is entirely dedicated to narrating his most memorable impressions, adventures and reflections in the tropics. Comparing the book with the original transcriptions of the lectures, there is hardly any change in content, as shown by Tim Benton.¹³

Grosso modo, one could say that the book is divided in four parts, namely: The ‘American Prologue’, a series of ten lectures in Buenos Aires, the ‘Brazilian Corollary’ and the Appendix (‘The Temperature of Paris’ and ‘The Atmosphere of Moscow’). Particularly in the ‘American Prologue’ and ‘Brazilian Corollary’, Le Corbusier evinces axiomatic changes in his way of writing about architecture and urbanism if compared to his previous publications during the twenties. For instance, a less positivist approach whose arguments are based on individual and immediate experiences and sensations written in first person point of view is impossible to ignore. As Tim Benton remarked, this strategy had already been employed in his conferences to gain the interest of the audience.¹⁴ Despite agreeing with Benton’s point, I argue, however, that Le Corbusier’s new approach goes far beyond the purpose of impacting the public.

In this sense, it seems appropriate to divide my analysis in two moments. The first one focuses on the notions of order presented in Le Corbusier’s lectures held in Buenos Aires. In spite of presenting several meanings, they would be part of a similar discourse which was built through the twenties. The second part is devoted to the ‘American Prologue’ and the ‘Brazilian Corollary’, written at the end of the trip and where Le Corbusier seems to give evidence of a change in his discourse.

«I think that these ten lectures at Buenos Aires will be, for me, the last on the subject of the architectural revolution fomented by modern techniques»

Le Corbusier.
‘An Aside’ in ‘Précisions’, p.267.

As Le Corbusier states above, the experience in South America culminates in a period of the so-called ‘architectural revolution’, a time of dense written production and reflections during the twenties that argue for a new understanding of architecture. In Buenos Aires, Le Corbusier synthesizes his ideas in a format

of ten lectures. Amongst them, there is one which is vital to Le Corbusier at this time, as well as it is producing a direct effect on his subsequent arguments through the book, namely ‘Zeitgeist’.¹⁵ Not by coincidence, it is the theme treated the first lecture. Within the declarations of the ‘Zeitgeist’, Le Corbusier often employs the idea of order to define architecture, making this evident several times throughout the book. «Architecture is an act of conscious willpower», he states. «To create architecture is to put in order. Put what in order? Functions and objects.»¹⁶

Order, however, is not necessarily expressed in the same manner. Moreover, it encompasses several other terms. On the repetitions of these terms, as well as the constant rearrangements of his arguments into new statements, Le Corbusier builds his discourse. In order to examine such a web of words, giving them certain coherence, but without willing to reduce their complexity, it seems pertinent to organize them in three major ‘clouds’. Despite being grouped in reality, I would rather call them clouds when addressing this net of words. Clouds embody an ephemeral movement, as well as certain blurriness within their borders.¹⁷ These qualities allow me to gather terms which are neither homogeneous in their significance nor presented as one unity necessarily.

One first cloud brings together ideas attached to geometry, mathematical unity, proportion and harmony, rooted in the ‘Historiography of the Architectural thinking’.¹⁸ Le Corbusier, who having had different kinds of education (formal and informal) within the artistic and architectonic milieu in Switzerland, Germany and France, as well as making numerous voyages in his youth, is undoubtedly familiar with these notions. Briefly, Le Corbusier attempts to demonstrate in several arguments that by using principles of geometry in the process of design, one would guarantee order, precision and proportion, therefore avoiding arbitrariness. As many other architects from his time, Le Corbusier also connects geometry, proportion and composition to beauty. In this respect, Adrian Forty writes a lucid analysis which places Le Corbusier’s discourse into a wider context.¹⁹

Classification and organization are mainly the notions assembled in the second cloud. They are employed in several ways, but the ‘most doctrinaire’ is the one presented in the chapter ‘The Plan of the Modern House’, in which he links a biological argumentation to an aesthetic and social approach.

The architectural revolution, Le Corbusier states, «implies different acts: 1. to classify, 2. to dimension, 3. to circulate, 4. to compose and, 5. to proportion».¹⁸ Formulated differently, these terms appear to be closer to an understanding of a certain social order. Le Corbusier's arguments lead thus to a conclusion that, by using organization and classification, one would avoid chaos in architecture. Though Le Corbusier's formulations may sound convincing, his resulting arguments are questionable. In this sense, Benton's analyses are luminous.²¹ For instance, «if we are inspired today by the desire for organization», Le Corbusier states, «it is because in the past a notion of disorder, or disorganization, of a state of trouble, of perturbation was implied.»²² However, the first sentence is not necessarily determined by the latter.

The third cloud embraces the idea of economy. This term is rather open, as it might be connected to notions more evident in mathematics, but also simplicity. It would mean, borrowing Le Corbusier's words, «tearing oneself away from complexities». Following his arguments, this would represent «a step that leads from confusion toward the clarity of geometry».²³

Thus, the use of terms and sentences in order to build an argument is not always based on logical thinking. Psycho-sensorial factors would be as equally important to Le Corbusier since they may provoke impact and stir emotions. As a result, Le Corbusier's poetics would be alternating between two bases, namely a sensitive intuition and a deductive logic.²⁴ Through these two pillars, the argumentation of order seems to be structured.

«... I should like to give you, you the student of architecture, the hatred of rendering. [...] Architecture is in space, in extent, in depth, in height: it is volumes and circulation. Architecture is made inside one's head. The sheet of paper is useful only to fix the design, to transmit it to one's client and one's contractor [...] Architecture is organization. You are an organizer, not a draftsman.»

Le Corbusier,
«Précisions», p 230.

Whereas the stay in Buenos Aires marks a rupture in Le Corbusier as a lecturer, the Brazilian experience provokes profound affects and immediate changes within the «man». The implications of the trip go far

beyond Le Corbusier's architectural discourse.²⁵ In the «Brazilian Corollary»,²⁶ for instance, Le Corbusier declares his state of excitement as «when everything is so sublime [in Rio] and so magnificent, when one has taken a long flight over the city like a bird gliding, ideas attack you».²⁷ The drawings of the urban design for Rio – quickly sketched in his private carnets while flying over the city – was immediately transformed into public discourse during his lecture in the same city. In other words, it was while he was traveling through Brazil that Le Corbusier publicized his narratives as a tourist and as an architect in parallel – narratives based on his experiences in loco. This combination of traveler, tourist, architect, urban designer and lecturer is indeed singular in comparison to his previous voyages. As such, not only Le Corbusier's «practice of traveling» has then undergone significant change, but also his «practice of writing».²⁸

«When one is at Rio de Janeiro (...) A sort of disorderly green flame above the city, always, everywhere, and which changes appearance at one's every step. The tourist is tireless in his praise, his enthusiasm is reborn at every corner; the city seems to be made for his pleasure.»

Le Corbusier,
«Corollary» in «Précisions», p. 233.

In both prologue and corollary, Le Corbusier seems to put aside his dogmatic discourse. Rather, his ideas are presented more «freely» and through a sequence of personal discoveries either wandering in Rio de Janeiro on foot or experiencing it aboard the airplane. These texts certainly contain a conscious strategy to move and to gain attention from their readers. But it would be a reductive approach to Le Corbusier's unconscious action to write with such a passionate tone, whose factors and processes transcend linear influences or causal sources.

«Order» appears then more in a sort of «back-stage» area – rather clouded such as the notions of geometry and economy – whereas judgment is problematized with more evidence. Immersed in an atmosphere of the «forest» as he declares – though some of his most enlightening notes were written on a country property owned by his friend Paulo Prado²⁹ not very far from the urbanized São Paulo city – Le Corbusier writes a text in his «carnets B4»³⁰ which is, except for a few alterations, reproduced in the «Prologue».

«One must always be ready to judge, always.»³¹ His lucid words present a Le Corbusier less positivist and more dubious and whose ideas appear to drink from sources of post-Kantian thinkers such as Nietzsche, for instance. More than a drastic change in the notion of *order*, there is a nuanced displacement within Le Corbusier's discourse, one that is less literal and more abstract in its terms. One that seems to accept certain harmonious disorders, as well as the impossibility to *put his own order into everything*, such as into the imposing tropical forest. The architect thus begins to act in a *between* situation whose first response, ironically or not, is more obscure in his architecture during the thirties, but clearer in his writings, paintings and photographically.

- 1 De Smet, Catherine: *«Vers une architecture du livre. Le Corbusier: édition et mise en pages, 1912-1965*, Lars Müller Publishers, Baden, 2007; Benton, Tim: *«The Rhetoric of Modernism: Le Corbusier as a Lecturer*. English edition, Birkhäuser, Basel, Boston, Berlin, 2009; Boyer, Christine: *«Le Corbusier, homme de lettres*», Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2011.
- 2 Part of this text was also built through discussions occurred in the seminar *«Disturbed Order*, organized during the Spring semester 2012 by Prof. Ákos Moravánszky, Karl Kegler and Sebastian Stich.
- 3 Lucan, Jacques [Ed.]: *«Le Corbusier: Une Encyclopédie*, George Pompidou, Paris, 1987; von Moos, Stanislaus; Arthur Rüegg [Ed.]: *«Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier*. Applied Arts, Architecture, Painting, Photography, 1907-1922, New Haven, New York, 2002; Cohen, Jean-Louis; Benton, Tim: *«Le Corbusier Le Grand*», Phaidon Press, London, 2008; Baudouï, Rémi; Dercelles Arnaud [Ed.]: *«Le Corbusier. Correspondance. Lettres à la famille 1900-1925*», Infolio, Gollion, 2011.
- 4 Koselleck, Reinhart: *«Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*», MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1985; Lucan, Jacques [Ed.]: *«Le Corbusier: Une Encyclopédie*; Topalov, Christian [Ed.]: *«Les aventures des mots de la ville*», Robert Laffont, Paris, 2010.
- 5 Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, *«Sur la plastique*, in: *«L'Esprit Nouveau* n.1, Paris, October 1920.
- 6 Le Corbusier: *«Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*, Crès et Cie, Paris, 1930.
- 7 Le Corbusier: *«Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme*, Crès et Cie, Paris, 1930.
- 8 Le Corbusier gives lectures in Buenos Aires, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro between October and December 1929.
- 9 von Moos, Stanislaus: *«Voyages en ZigZag* in: von Moos, Stanislaus; Rüegg Arthur [Ed.]: *«Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier*», Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2002, p.23-44; Giordani, Jean-Pierre: *«Territoires: nouveaux plans urbains, les esquisses sud-américaines et le Plan Obus d'Algér*. In: Lucan, Jacques [Ed.]: *«Le Corbusier, une encyclopédie*», Éd. du Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1987, pp.404; da Silva Pereira, Margareth et al.: *«Le Corbusier e o Brasil»*, Tessela/Projeto Editora, São Paulo, 1987; McLeod, Mary: *«Review of Le Corbusier, Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning, the 1991 English translation*, JSAH 90 (March 1996), p. 89-92; Martins, Carlos: *«Etat, culture et nature aux origines de l'architecture moderne au Brésil*; Le Corbusier et Lucio Costa, 1929-1936. In: *«Le Corbusier: nature*», Ed. La Villette, Paris 2004, p. 195-201; Tsioris, Yannis [Ed.]: *«Conférence de Rio. Le Corbusier au Brésil, 1936»*, Flammarion, Paris, 2006.
- 10 Le Corbusier: *«Prologue* in: *«Précisions»*, p. 20.
- 11 Idem, p. 21.
- 12 Le Corbusier: *«Oeuvre complète, 1929-1934»*, Girsberger, Zürich, 1935.
- 13 Benton, Tim: *«The Rhetoric of Modernism»*, p. 134.
- 14 Idem, p. 27.
- 15 *«Zeitgeist* incorporates the idea that new man needs to live and to act in accordance to its own time. Since the world has been radically changed by mechanization, a new behavior and a new architecture is demanded.
- 16 Le Corbusier: *«Précisions»*, p.68.
- 17 Among scholars who have studied the concept of cloud, two are particularly important for this text, namely Hubert Damisch and Margareth da Silva Pereira. Hubert Damisch: *«A theory of cloud: toward a history of painting»*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002; da Silva Pereira, Margareth: *«As nebulosas intelectuais: redes de cidades e redes intelectuais na circulação de teorias de arquitetura e urbanismo»*. In: Pini, Ivonne et al. [Ed.]: *«Seminario Fuentes no convencionales»*, Universidad Nacional de Colombia: Facultad de Artes, Bogota, 2007.
- 18 Forty, Adrian: *«Words and buildings: a vocabulary of modern architecture*», Thames & Hudson, London, 2004.
- 19 Forty, Adrian: *«Words and buildings»*.
- 20 Le Corbusier: *«Précisions»*, p.124.
- 21 Benton, Tim: *«The Rhetoric of Modernism»*, p. 31.
- 22 Le Corbusier: *«Précisions»*, p. 216.
- 23 Le Corbusier: *«Précisions»*, p.80.
- 24 Benton, Tim: *«The Rhetoric of Modernism»*, p. 27.
- 25 A few authors have also presented similar conclusions. In this sense I suggest two readings: von Moos, Stanislaus: *«Voyages en Zig-Zag»*, da Silva Pereira, Margareth: *«Le Corbusier e o Brasil»*.
- 26 The Brazilian Corollary is the text originally produced for the lecture in Rio de Janeiro, December 1929.
- 27 Le Corbusier: *«Brazilian Corollary*», in: *«Précisions»*, p. 236.
- 28 In fact, the voyages Le Corbusier carried out in the end of the twenties and beginning of the thirties – in particular to the U.R.S.S., Brazil, Argentina and Algeria – produced a relevant impact on his architectural and written production. Nevertheless, it would be in the South American voyage that Le Corbusier would attain the maturity in his discourse and, will establish the year of 1929 as the moment of rupture in his work and concerns regarding Architecture. See, Ortiz dos Santos, Daniela; Magalhães, Mario C. P.: *«Le Corbusier voyageur: arquivos de uma experiência arquitetônica»*, in: Fischer, Sylvia et al. [Ed.]: *«IX Docomomo Brazil Conference»*, Brasília, 2011.
- 29 Paulo Prado was a Brazilian entrepreneur and mécènes d'art who sponsored the Brazilian First Modern Art Week in 1922.
- 30 Le Corbusier's carnets are held in the Le Corbusier Foundation.
- 31 Le Corbusier: *«American Prologue»*, in: *«Précisions»*, p. 12.

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