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What good is bad photography?

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Abstract
In 1957, for the small picture book *Ronchamp*, in a handwritten note that itself serves as illustration, Le Corbusier called attention to the book's photographic text, instructing the reader to "observe the play of shadows. Try looking at the images upside-down or sideways. You'll discover the game!"

Disciplines
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WHAT GOOD IS BAD PHOTOGRAPHY?

_The photograph teaches us to see._ -Louis Aragon

In 1957, for the small picture book _Ronchamp_, in a handwritten note that itself serves as illustration, Le Corbusier called attention to the book's photographic text, instructing the reader to "_observe the play of shadows._ _Play the game...Try looking at the images upside-down or sideways. You'll discover the game!_" [1]
The images are high contrast, edited towards abstraction. Shadows are dense and black. Distinctly geometric, they assume the same prominence as architectural elements featured in the photographs. In the upside-down viewing, space becomes shape; void becomes solid; and all the components shift relative to the picture plane. Walls that formerly appeared to recede into the picture plane, now project. The effect is kaleidoscopic. In experiencing such metamorphosis, we are struck by the extreme frailty of our perception. Perception one had previously thought reliable, a source of certainty, even absolute, here becomes highly relative. We recognize our vision as extremely limited, incapable of seeing all of the many layers of the world.

II

In 1913, forty-four years before Ronchamp and shortly after Edouard Jeanneret made his famed voyage d'orient, the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky wrote in Reminiscences of an occasion in which he was "enchanted" by "an unexpected spectacle" that confronted him in his studio, an experience which proved to be of profound significance to his painting. "It was the hour when dusk draws in," he began,

I returned home...still dreamy and absorbed in the work I had completed, and suddenly saw an indescribably beautiful picture, pervaded by an inner glow. At first, I stopped short and then quickly approached this mysterious picture, on which I could discern only forms and colors and whose content was incomprehensible. At once, I discovered the key to the puzzle: it was a picture I had painted, standing on its side against the wall.²

Deeply affected, Kandinsky attempted a re-creation of his impression of the picture the next day. But the light was not right and the objects in the painting obstructed his reverie. "Now I could see that objects harmed my pictures," he concluded, noting that a "terrifying abyss of all kinds of questions, a wealth of
III

In 1911, at age 23, Charles Edouard Jeanneret left his job in Germany and, with a friend and a newly purchased camera, traveled through the Balkans to western Turkey, to Greece, to Rome and through Italy. Many months later, he returned to his hometown in Switzerland where he remained until the Great War wound down. He then migrated to Paris, cultural capital of the world, where, together with Amédeé Ozenfant, he created Purist paintings. With Ozenfant, too, he edited an international journal, *L’Esprit Nouveau*. In 1923, articles about architecture that he had written for *L’Esprit Nouveau* were gathered together and published as a book, *Vers une architecture*.  

At the same time, Jeanneret began designing small houses in a modern idiom, amalgamations of art and industry: bright, cubic, without decoration and utterly photogenic. In the mid-1920’s, he adopted the pseudonym Le Corbusier; and as Le Corbusier, he designed larger buildings. In 1929, he issued a report of his activities since 1910 including sketches from his 1911 journey. The first of eight, self-edited reports on himself, Volume-1 of the *Œuvre complète* featured photographs of Le Corbusier’s new architecture—photographs that he himself had carefully cropped, edited and placed on pages. All was done with regulating lines intent on bringing an order to images and pages. The correct ordering of shapes and relationships resulted in a beauty that might be felt viscerally as ‘resonance.’  

Yet in the photographs made by Edouard Jeanneret on his 1911 *voyage d’orient*, no such order is evident. On the contrary, many of these photographs seem the unfortunate mistakes of an amateur unfamiliar with his camera: blurred, grainy,
spotted, streaked, over- and under-expose. Why, then, make something more of
them? Why find importance in these bad photographs?

Though technically flawed, these bad photographs are nevertheless a unique
recording of reality. Scenes are condensed and presented in black and white.
Legibility is corroded and, as with the upside-down photograph in *Ronchamp* and
the painting sighted sideways by Kandinsky, the image is emptied of its literal
content. Reality is not erased but re-presented without descriptive detail,
depicted in a rectilinear composition of dots and streaks, shapes and shades.

Often these images assume an order, a visual *parti* made evident with their
abstraction. Occasionally this *parti* parallels that employed by visual artists in the
1920’s and by Le Corbusier himself in his design of images for *L’Esprit Nouveau*
and *Vers une architecture* and in the editing of photographs made by professional
photographers of his architecture. Ultimately, Le Corbusier employs these visual
strategies in the creation of the built environment.

One such *parti*, the ‘truncated pyramid composition,’ is particularly evident. Three
examples must suffice, each a variation on the composition. Each records space in
a rectilinear frame, organizing the relationships of shapes in a manner that
catalyzes the composition and resonates with a sense of illusion. Thus Jeanneret’s
photograph of a long, deep, populated street in Edirne, the Old Mosque (*Eski
Camii*) in the background presents us with ‘tunnel vision,’ a one-point perspective
normal to the manner in which the camera sees [2]. But here the image is
rendered in dense blacks and brilliant whites without grays to describe the middle
ground. Clearly configured, its truncated pyramid pattern is highly ambiguous.
The pyramid can be read as receding deep *into* the picture plane. Simultaneously,
it might be read as projecting *out of* the picture plane.
Images assuming a perspectival, truncated pyramid formation are of particular interest for three reasons: photography sees in perspective; perspective is the medium of architectural space; and Parisian avant-garde art since Cezanne, including Purism, sought to undermine perspective. Yet how to undermine perspective in a medium that insists on it?

It should be noted that Le Corbusier used the truncated pyramid composition often in graphic design, notably in images and advertisements for L’Esprit Nouveau—many of which later found their way into his 1923 Vers une architecture—and on the cover of the first edition of Vers une architecture. Taken from a brochure for the Cunard Line, this cover image is a photograph not of a building but of the promenade of the ocean liner Aquitania, the space of an industrial object, [3]. It draws the eye deep into the space of the picture. The obvious incongruity between the book’s stated subject and the industrial vessel depicted is undoubtedly provocative, but the truly exceptional aspect of the image is not its content but its form. With sustained viewing, the depicted space
reverses itself. Its literal content begins to oscillate and ultimately the pictorial image collapses to a two-dimensional design, its deep perspectival space flattened to a rectangle composed of four triangles. One imagines the visual paradox intentional on the part of Le Corbusier.

The truncated pyramid configuration was well known to perceptual psychologists in the early 20th Century, its illusion investigated by contemporary avant-garde painters. El Lissisky employed it extensively, as did Paul Klee, who documented the strategy in his *Thinking Eye* [4]. Its most distilled manifestation is found in Jacques Villon’s 1929 painting, *Abstraction* [5]. Photographs of Le Corbusier’s architecture were edited into the truncated pyramid order as early as 1924 with an image of the Ozenfant studio interior [6] and this order is very evident in the portrayal of ‘scenes’ from Villa Cook and the Villa Savoye [7] [8]. All three ‘image’ architecture in this configuration; none employ the configuration as a strategy to order the architecture itself.
In the late 1920’s, the truncated pyramid composition was elevated to an icon in the colored, one-point perspective of Charlotte Perriand and Pierre Jeanneret’s interior for the Salon d’Automne [9]. With the revised scheme for the Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier employed the strategy to order architectural space. There, the ramp leading to the villa’s toit jardin visually converges to a ‘real’ focal point: a square aperture in a defining wall of the jardin. [10] Does one sense this when walking the ramp of Savoye, or is it known only from the Marius Gravot photograph of the ramp, a two-dimensional image that assumes the formation of the truncated pyramid? Is the authenticity of the object diminished when image is privileged over object? One recalls Kandinsky’s question.

Among the ‘bad photographs’ made by Jeanneret on his voyage d’orient, there are other, more subtly manifested versions of the truncated pyramid configuration. Two are described here. The first features a black void—a near-square in a rubble wall not unlike the rubble walls of the Villa de Mandrot, Pavillion Suisse or Le Corbusier’s Porte Molitor studio [11]. In its tilt, the black void levitates free of architectural constraints. With its size and central position, it dominates the image. The photograph is not a precise rendering; yet it is the tilt of the void, not the lack of focus that qualifies this photograph as ‘bad.’ The wall
in the photograph is solid and muscular; the black void vacuous, light as air. ‘Absence’ is made evident in the picture as the void floats free from the heavyweight wall, portrayed not as the logical result of the wall’s muscularity but as the product of the photographer’s tilt. The photograph itself has made the subject.

Black-shadow diagonals to the right and to the left assist in establishing the scene as a truncated pyramid composition. In far less rigid formation than in Jeanneret’s picture of an Edirne street above, the focal point of this photograph is neither in the middle of the frame or a dot marking the apex of four triangles. Rather, the big black swatch is the focal point, and though undoubtedly a void, it is portrayed in this photograph as an object as well. This curious contradiction—a void as object that offers focus to an image’s truncated pyramid formation—is evident as a strategy that Le Corbusier employed time and again in the creation of architecture in which objectivity evokes a sensation of space, realizing in three dimensions the two-dimensional truncated pyramid formation [12, 13].
The second example is like the first; but rather than featuring a void as focal point, in the pointillist abstraction of the poorly executed photograph, a solid rectangle is shown [14]. Blackness dissolves the solidity of the rectangle, and the composition assumes the truncated pyramid formation with this rectangle located in the center foreground of the image, at the apex of diagonals in the photograph—diagonals formed when white meets black and black meets gray. A geometric solid that suggests a void, the void positioned as focal point in a visual
frame: the arrangement would be employed by Le Corbusier three-dimensionally in architecture and two-dimensionally in images of his architecture—presumably for the purpose of evoking space [15, 16].

Le Corbusier believed in visualization. He thought it essential to teach what he termed “the notion of vision.” For him such vision meant first “to conceive and then to see.” He promoted ocular experience as a means of discovery and of discerning ‘a sense of truth,’ insisting in his many books that we ‘look again’, that we view the world ‘with fresh eyes.’ In provoking thoughtful, experiential, engaged perception, images that oscillate accommodate all of this.

Photography proved an ideal collaborator for Le Corbusier. The photograph was considered an off-strike of reality; the camera, it was said, never lied. The abstraction of bad photography encouraged an oscillation that conveyed reality
as phenomenal—a fleeting sensation, a "skillful, accurate and magnificent play of masses seen in light."

The illusory space of representation evident in these images ultimately informed Le Corbusier's architectural creations. Present in the bad photographs of the voyage d'orient was a space not yet created in architecture. Bad photography offered the seeing mind of Le Corbusier not what was, but what could be. "Il faut toujours dire ce que l'on voit," he believed, "surtout il faut toujours, ce qui et plus difficile, voir ce que l'on voit."

In memory of Mogens Krstrup

NOTES

In more elaborate form, "What Good is Bad Photography?" was presented in Istanbul at the XVIIe Rencontre de la Fondation Le Corbusier: Centenaire du Voyage d'Orient on 8 October 2011. This is a more extensively illustrated English original to an article translated to French as "À quoi bon la mauvaise photographie?" in L'invention d'un architecte: Le Voyage en Orient de Le Corbusier (Paris: Fondation Le Corbusier, 2013) pp160-171. It could not have been conceived without constant reference to Giuliano Gresleri's remarkable 1985 book Le Corbusier, viaggio in Oriente: Gli in edititi di Charles-Edourd Jeanneret, fotografo e scrittore.


3 Ibid., p370.

4 Colin Rowe first identified this blank, square shape in his 1950 essay, "Mannerism and Modern Architecture," (The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa, Cambridge MA, MIT, 1976) elaborating on the "unrelieved, blank, white surface" of the entrance façade of Le Corbusier's 1916 Villa Schwob. He returned to the subject in his 1987 essay, "The provocative façade: frontality and contraposto" (Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century,
London, British Arts Council, 1987) where he finds antecedents for the blank panel not in Le Corbusier’s own two-dimensional strategies, but in the work of Perret, Wright, Palladio, and Michelangelo.