

## Europe, Le Corbusier and the Balkans

### Abstract:

The Balkans has been constructed, indeed mythologized as the barbaric outpost of Europe, and the term has become an adjective and a verb, a decontextualised synonym for backward, tribal, and un-civilized. The perception of the Balkans as the 'non-European part of Europe' exploits the edge location against a Europe inscribed as centre of civilization, even if it is geographically part of Europe. Such sentiments have erupted again with the tragedy of Yugoslavia generalized by the West as a Balkan problem. Todorova's seminal publication, *Imagining the Balkans*, dismantles this and points to differences between Balkanism and Orientalism. One key knot is the role of the Ottoman Empire and its departure from the Balkans (and Europe).

This paper addresses this issue from the perspective of Le Corbusier's so-called 'reversed' travel East to Istanbul, rather than to Rome, the grand tour destination. In 1911, one year prior to the 1912-13 Balkan Wars, the architect departed from modern twentieth-century Europe and finished at the Acropolis, its origin; but in between Le Corbusier travelled inland through the Balkans. By highlighting the Oriel principle (Istanbul) and the Parthenon, and only minimally engaging the inland Balkan journey, architectural discourse illustrates the imaginary boundaries of European interest and desire. Yet Le Corbusier's letters as transcribed in *Voyage d'Orient* (1966; *Journey to the East*, 2007) reveal a charged and erotic language. He was taken by Slavic peasant pottery and purchased several items in villages between Belgrade and Trnovo. But he also felt disappointment and disgust towards the Balkans, especially the cities like Belgrade and Bucharest. His criticism of Europe, at times describing it as the real 'savage' evolves a reflexive attitude to the question 'What is Europe?'. Le Corbusier's journey of self and otherness provides an intertextuality of the sense in which the Balkans is [not] European.

Keywords: Le Corbusier, Journey to the East, Balkans, white room, 1911

1236 words

## Europe, Le Corbusier and the Balkans

The Balkans has been constructed, indeed mythologized as the barbaric outpost of Europe, the 'non-European part of Europe' its edge geography exploited against one of Europe's foundational myths as 'civilization'. Balkanism as synonym for backward, tribal, and un-civilized re-appears in the tragedy of Yugoslavia, generalized by the West as a brutal Balkan War,<sup>1</sup> wiping out the entire modern socialist history of Yugoslavia, and Europe's spectacular World War 2 simultaneously. Industrialization, modernization and urbanization define twentieth century Europe, but in *Imagining the Balkans* Todorova reminds us that processes of homogenization and practices of ethnic cleansing were integral to the formation of the modern European nation-state.<sup>2</sup> The Balkans had not caught up.

It is therefore uncanny that buried deep in the history of modern European architecture we find the Balkans. In his 1911 travel eastward Le Corbusier 'reversed' the architectural grand tour. With the advice and companionship of intellectual friends (Ritter and Klipstein), twenty-four year-old Charles Eduourd Jeanneret embarked on a journey that was to become his formative education and 'rite of passage'.<sup>3</sup> His notebooks capture a reflexive self and otherness providing an inter-textuality between the Balkans and Europe, and in the 55 years

in between the 1911 journey and its publication in *Voyage d'Orient* (1966, six months *after* his death in the Mediterranean), the transition from Jeanneret to Le Corbusier.

In the title the word 'Orient' blurs the boundaries between the Balkans and the Orient, later corrected/changed by Ivan Žaknić (who has Yugoslav origin) in the English edition, *Journey to the East*.<sup>4</sup> By highlighting the Oriel principle (Istanbul/otherness) it is not clear what the 'oriel principle' is and the Acropolis (origin/ideal), architectural interpretation and discourse has inscribed the imaginary boundaries of Europe. The Balkans are overlooked, if not elided by that structure. Balkanism evolved independently from Orientalism, and in certain aspects, against it as in the absence of a European colonial legacy, argues Todorova.<sup>5</sup> The perception of backwardness implicit in Balkanism, partly by its links to the Ottoman Empire, is illustrated by her analysis of the effort to de-orientalise regions such as Greece and Hungary. In 1911, Jeanneret was unaware of the political chaos in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire, but by 1912, and again in the early 1990s, the Balkan states' enthusiasm to join Europe as nation-state, imagining themselves as European, was palpable.

Jeanneret's inland journey through the Balkans was an eccentric movement through collection of villages, towns, cities, and sites via boat, train, walking, and mule. Overlooking the Balkans means the discourse which discourse? misses the emotive contradictions, the charged and erotic language of Jeanneret's letters, criticized by his father, yet (why yet? What is this opposed to?) the beginnings of the significant role of writing for Le Corbusier and the course of European architecture. The first inter-textuality right word here? is between modernization and tradition 'we others from the centre of civilization are savages'<sup>6</sup> and '[We] had to flee from the invading and dirty 'Europeanization' to the tranquil refuges where – abating, and soon to be submerged – the great popular tradition survives.'<sup>7</sup> His negativity towards cities, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest; Athens (eclipsed by the Acropolis), and even Rome does not prove enticing, is a reaction to their efforts to modernise.

Jeanneret's passion for the Slavic peasant pottery whose 'forms are voluminous and swollen with vitality' and "to feel the generous belly of a vase, to caress its slender neck . . ."<sup>8</sup> elevate the potter as artist, while sexualising/feminising the object. Aesthetic sensuality was the ingredient that elevated art above the sciences. Jeanneret was preoccupied with this ontological sense of how the object affects the physical being. His encounter with folk art induced a severe criticism of modern Europe where manufacturing was destroying such creative forces.<sup>9</sup> Photographs have captured Le Corbusier's enduring interest in Slavic peasant ceramics that he purchased in villages between Belgrade and Tarnovo. You could cut the last sentence here (it'll be evident in your powerpoint) and add another sentence on this folk art critique of the modern (also found elsewhere in LC – such as his famous flight over the M'Zab much later).

The Balkan vases were in fact water-drinking urns (would be taken in the field, water is kept cool, and slender neck prevents bugs entering). Jeanneret's attention to objects, costumes, woven fabrics, folklore had his father lamenting about when he was going to focus on architecture. Architecture, however, was interwoven and evolved through this rite of passage of folklore, culture, and industry.<sup>10</sup> This second inter-textuality involves the 'hand' – hand made/art – and its role within modernization. It was to become a central tenet as his architecture matured and belongs to the hand of Le Corbusier, and intimately to each architect who has made the pilgrimage to Ronchamp and discovered the shell imprint in the béton brut.

Le Corbusier's and modern architecture's obsession with the white room has several references in the journey through the Balkans. This is not the abstract white of stylistic modernism, but the white against which the drama of life occurs; and especially the 'white room' against which the rituals – weddings, deaths – are staged. The white room of rural vernacular architecture offers a third inter-textuality between Europe and the Balkan journey. It is expressed in the notes about 'the courtyard of an inn enclosed by white walls and covered with a trellis,' in Negotin, Serbia, where intoxicated with local wine and the solemn gypsy music during a wedding ceremony, Jeanneret states, 'I would like to see them seated in a white room with bare walls . . . The great stanzas would fill the bare white room . . .'<sup>11</sup> Le Corbusier will hold these great incompatibilities - the void of modernization and ritual of vernacular architecture – in tension.

Todorova argues that Balkanism evolved partly as a reaction to the disappointment of west European's 'classical' expectation, and certainly Jeanneret is at times disgusted ([isn't this a separate statement? The sentence implies the disgust was felt at 'classical expectation, yet I suspect you mean disgust at what he saw in the Balkans. Can you clarify?](#)). Yet one motive for Jeanneret's eastward travel ~~east~~ is to regain the 'classicism' that middle and north Europe had deviated from. The vernacular was used to nourish 'classicism' but the young Jeanneret surrenders to the power of the white peasant room and the practice of whitewashing: 'that way the house is always bright.'<sup>12</sup> With the annotated sketches about large windows in a small room - the beginnings of the five principles are stirred.

Prior to arriving at the Acropolis, the pause at the monastic site of Mount Athos on the Aegean Sea was both life threatening and cathartic. In 1911 there were twenty monasteries, inhabited by 7000 monks, each with a private cell; coming together at meal times and for prayer.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the Ema monastery in Italy, Mount Athos is rarely interpreted in architectural discourse. It points to a significant concern that Todorova raises in *Imagining the Balkans* - the Balkans has been predominantly Christian in character but Western Christianity has struggled with the Eastern Byzantine church, producing a fault line between Latin and Orthodox lands, despite Constantinople being simply known as the City for a millennium.<sup>14</sup> Is Europe's differentiation of Byzantine/Orthodox Christianity as non-western another inter-textuality between the Balkans and new Europe? [I wonder whether the term 'inter-textuality' is doing the job you want from it here, and elsewhere.](#)

It took Le Corbusier three years to write that section [– not sure what you mean by this...](#). The monastery, solitude, interiority, the inner self, 'the almost superhuman struggle with oneself,'<sup>15</sup> was possibly his most profound contribution to modern European architecture, evident in the most important works, and in his cabanon and art studio. While Le Corbusier did not pray daily ([he was an atheist](#)), he practiced the solitary acts of writing, painting, building with the dedication of a monk or an icon-painter.<sup>16</sup>

I have not discussed the Balkans as self-identity/identities, the next chapter of this work [– cut – not relevant here](#). The position in this paper does not argue that the Balkans caused modern European architecture, but through Le Corbusier's 1911 journey it has shown that the Balkans are buried in the entangled histories and geographies of modern European architecture. [Could do with a longer closing statement – is the Balkans a correction to western Europe? Is it just another folk site that artists found all over Europe? How crucial is the semi-otherness of orthodox Christianity and the proximity of the Ottomans?](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Todorova, 1997: 161

<sup>2</sup> Todorova, 1997: 4-20

<sup>3</sup> Brooks 1996: 255-303

<sup>4</sup> Le Corbusier /Žaknić 1987

<sup>5</sup> Todorova, 1997: 20

<sup>7</sup> Le Corbusier/ Žaknić 1987: 15

<sup>8</sup> Le Corbusier/ Žaknić 1987: 16 & 14

<sup>9</sup> Le Corbusier /Žaknić 1987: 18

<sup>10</sup> Le Corbusier, 1925

<sup>11</sup> Le Corbusier /Žaknić 1987: 46 & 47

<sup>12</sup> Le Corbusier /Žaknić 1987: 60

<sup>13</sup> Žaknić 1990: 29; Tsiomis 2013

<sup>14</sup> Todorova, 1997: 11, 18, 149-153.

<sup>15</sup> Le Corbusier /Žaknić 1987: 173

<sup>16</sup> Žaknić 1990: 35