

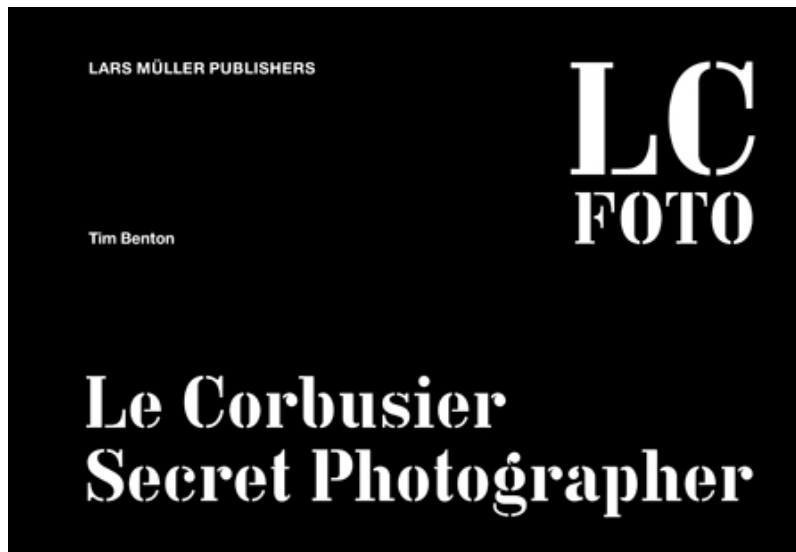
Review

LC Foto Le Corbusier Secret Photographer, Tim Benton

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In 2013, emeritus professor of art Tim Benton published *LC Foto Le Corbusier Secret Photographer*, an immaculately researched and well-written book which covers the development of Le Corbusier's photographic output. Le Corbusier had an ambiguous relationship with photography throughout his career; on the one hand he relied heavily on professional photography to promote his built work and support his discourse, but on the other hand he 'maintained that photography was a stultifying activity, good only for lazy people'. In managing this image, he never allowed himself to be photographed holding a camera, while from 1916 and 1921, and again between 1936 and 1938, he literally took hundreds of photographs.¹

At the beginning of the twentieth century, when Le Cor-

busier was still named Charles-Édouard Jeanneret and busy finding his way as a budding architect, amateur photography became popular through the marketing of cheap cameras such as the Kodak Brownie and innovations in film technology. Much later, in an interview in the 1960s, Le Corbusier claimed, - as it turns out erroneously -, that a cheap Kodak of this type was his first camera. In the same interview he was dismissive of the creative potential of the photographic medium and contended that drawing was superior in aiding memory and understanding:

1 - Tim Benton, *LC Foto Le Corbusier Secret Photographer* (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013), 8.

*"I bought myself a little Kodak camera, which Kodak sold for six francs in order to sell film to all those idiots who use it, and I was one of them, and I noticed that by entrusting my emotions to a lens I was forgetting to have them pass by me – which was serious. So I abandoned my Kodak and I picked up my pencil, and ever since then I have always drawn everything, wherever I am."*²

The words 'Secret Photographer' in the title refer to the paradox that Le Corbusier throughout his life publicly maintained a trivializing attitude towards photography, while owning and using many, and often professional, cameras over the years. Furthermore, there was a period in which Le Corbusier took photographing so seriously that his pictures were of publishable quality. It is in fact likely that his keen visual eye was in part derived from his early photographic endeavours, as he developed an appreciation of the complexities of architectural photography early in his career. Having this experience may explain his insistence on handpicking professional photographers to photograph his buildings.

Lucien Hervé was one of these regulars and it is said that Le Corbusier proved to be somewhat difficult with others. Ezra Stoller for instance remembered that when he was asked by the Museum of Modern Art to take photos of Ronchamp Chapel Le Corbusier insisted that he would only co-operate if the museum would buy two of his paintings. Here again the ambiguous nature of the role of painting and the sketch may be revealed; Stoller was mystified as to why Le Corbusier craved to be acknowledged as a painter when he was such a formidable architect.³

Pointing to a similar insecurity; Le Corbusier published his own photographs rarely and largely remained silent on the topic of his photographic endeavours. In spite of this neglect, his photographic output deserves attention, according to Benton, firstly in terms of the quality of the

pictures he took, secondly as a commentary on his state of mind, and finally as part of the creative process and genesis of Le Corbusier's architectural output.

The book is divided in two parts; 'Jeanneret's First Photographic Campaign 1907-17' and 'Le Corbusier, the Cinema, and Cinematographic Photography 1936-38'. These two parts are further divided into chapters dedicated to the trips undertaken, the subject matter of the photos and analysis of the technical possibilities and disadvantages of the equipment used. Descriptive and informative essays, with evidence based argumentation to support Le Corbusier's authorship, are followed by sets of reproductions or 'albums' with selections of the best or most interesting photographs. Further fun features are the Quick Response codes which link to the website of Fondation Le Corbusier, where you can watch clip sequences shot by Le Corbusier with his Siemens B 16 mm movie camera.

The life of Le Corbusier is thus presented by way of the cameras he owned and the kind of pictures he took. With each new camera, Jeanneret moved to a different level of skill and style of photography. It is really interesting to learn how Jeanneret's development was partly dictated by the technical capacities of the camera and partly by the books he read and the architects he admired. Tim Benton's command of his subject matter is truly admirable; he presents his thesis with such clarity and offers such compelling evidence that his sleuthing never becomes boring.

We learn for instance that the first camera of Le Corbusier used H6 negatives, measuring ca. 9 x 9 cm, which excludes the possibility of the use of a Kodak Brownie, mentioned earlier, as it points to a Bull's Eye camera, which sold for considerably more than the six francs Le Corbusier remembered. Although its simple meniscus lens had its limitations, Le Corbusier went out of his way to produce as good a picture as he could, and he invested in a portrait lens, filters and a developing tank.

The limitations of the first Bull's Eye box camera, with its square format and long exposure times, compelled Le Corbusier to buy a more complicated glass plate camera in March or early April 1911. His new camera

2 - Ibid., 23. Original quote from an interview in the 1960s with Jacques Barsac, Ciné Service Technique, Paris, 1987.

3 - William Saunders, Ezra Stoller and Eric Himmel, Modern Architecture Photographs by Ezra Stoller (New York: Abrams, 1990)

had a double anastigmat lens, a rising front, and used 9 x 12 cm glass plate negatives or a roll-film holder for hand-held photographs. With this camera, Le Corbusier mainly took photos in landscape orientation and often used a rising front to capture the tops of buildings clearly. There is a Hüttig Cupido 80 from this period held by the Fondation Le Corbusier, long thought to be owned by Jeanneret, which fits most of the aforementioned characteristics. Benton proves quite convincingly, however, that since the Cupido 80 has the limitation of only being able to use its rising front when the camera is held in portrait orientation, Le Corbusier must have owned another make and model of camera. Comparable cameras of the period, with both rising fronts and cross fronts, were made by Ernemann, Hüttig and Voigtländer, and are therefore more likely candidates to have been used by Le Corbusier.

By delving into the technical specifics of the early cameras so deeply, Benton is able to offer a clarification and extension to research done by Giuliano Gresleri in *Les voyages d'Allemagne*, and *Voyage d'Orient, Carnets*, which already deals extensively with the same period in Le Corbusier's photography.

The semi-professional work with the second camera comes to a close when Jeanneret's camera breaks down, and for the remainder of the so-called *Voyage d'Orient* pictures are taken with a Brownie Kodak. He buys this cheaper alternative in Naples, in October 1911, and with this camera his photos become much more cinematic and emphatic, less staid. There is a distinct change in approach as the composition of angle and framing become more unexpected and the dark and light contrasts more striking. This is particularly evident in a truly stunning photo of the oculus of the Rome Parthenon, one of the few photos which Le Corbusier did decide to publish.⁴

As may be clear from my description, Tim Benton's essays go into great level of detail to support authorship and to describe the technique of the photos held in the various archives and attributed to Le Corbusier. This dedication to evidence based argumentation and contextualisation

is commendable, but fortunately does not take away from the visual delight of the photographs themselves. The interspersing of the narrative with photo-albums in which the various trips are documented and the photos are thematically arranged, keeps the book light and balanced.

The second part of the book is dedicated to the late thirties, when Le Corbusier acquires a Siemens B16 movie camera. This camera had a spring wound system, which allowed for automatic shooting of reels, but it could also be used for taking single frames. It is especially in these shots that a more intimate and relaxed Corbusier is revealed as the photos increasingly seem to focus on friends, family, landscapes, natural forms and disappearing ways of life. These pictures were taken in the late thirties and reflect the maturing of Le Corbusier's work; his shift to more sculptural work and away from technocratic purism. Tim Benton asserts that the relaxed style of these photos shows an affinity with the "New Photography" of the 1920s, and it is indeed true that the pictures are surprising visual explorations of quotidian life, nature and technology. One of my favourite albums is surely the trip on the *SS Conte Biancamano*, where Le Corbusier obsessively shoots the ocean liner from every possible angle. Pulleys, cranes, masts and winches, the photographs present us with a panoply of nautical objects which of course later find their way in the built work and paintings.

With this publication, Tim Benton sets the photographs of Le Corbusier within the context of the photographic and architectural developments of the day, but above all constructs the ultimate historiography of Le Corbusier's creative output as a photographer. More interestingly however, he is able to capture the personality of Le Corbusier and his insecurities with an almost embarrassing level of intimacy.

4 - Tim Benton, *LC Foto Le Corbusier Secret Photographer* (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013), 144. The photograph was used in Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, 1925.