

Le Corbusier

on camera

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The unknown films
of Ernest Weissmann

Veronique Boone

with a foreword by Tim Benton

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Foreword

by Tim Benton

Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret had worked with various draughtsmen in the 1920s – and notably with Pierre Emery, who worked intensively on the Quartier Moderne Frugès at Pessac – but it was the competition for the Palace of the League of Nations, in the winter of 1926–1927, that brought about the first large-scale introduction of international architects to the rue de Sèvres. From then on, the atelier was always full of young men and women who were drawn to the flame of Le Corbusier’s reputation. Many of them – such as Albert Frey, Josep Lluís Sert, Kunio Maekawa, Junzo Sakakura, Alfred Roth, and Charlotte Perriand – went on to establish themselves as leading modern architects around the world.

There is a log book of the presentation drawings made by these assistants dating from 4 April 1925. The first eleven pages are missing. From 7 February 1929 (page 26 verso of the “black book”), a column is labelled “dessinateur!” (draughtsman!) – and the first name we find is that of Ernest Weissmann.

Life in the rue de Sèvres was not always easy. We know from the witness of Alfred Roth, for example, how difficult was his position as site architect in Stuttgart during the construction of the two houses at the Weissenhof Siedlung in 1927.¹ Roth also recounts how, after the competition drawings for the League of Nations project had finally been sent off, Le Corbusier hired a coach and took them all for a trip to Chartres. At the end of the dinner, he made a rousing speech about how architecture was carried by the enthusiasm of the young, before admitting that he was not proposing to pay them. Eventually he relented and offered some of them, at least, the price of a ticket home.

Although Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret helped form a certain way of thinking among their young collaborators, the influences ran both ways. It is noticeable, for example, that the use of axonometric projections became more frequent after 1927. To give just one example, Norman Rice, trained in the Beaux-Arts system with Paul Cret in Philadelphia, drew axonometric projections for the de Beistegui apartment.² It is also true that some of the assistants were able to carry out projects that had eluded the master. For example, the Casa Bloc in Barcelona (1932–1936) was the first recognizable execution of Le Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse scheme. Josep Lluís Sert, who worked at the rue de Sèvres on and off from 1927 to 1929, was the link. Another example is the block of flats High Point One at Highgate, London (1933–1935) by the Russian architect Berthold Lubetkin, who worked briefly with Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier inaugurated the building and wrote an article celebrating it as a breakthrough in 1936.³ At the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* in Paris in 1937, two of Le Corbusier’s former assistants built important pavilions (Sakakura for Japan and Sert for the Spanish Republic). Although the design of the Yugoslav Pavilion was won in competition by Joseph Seissel, Weissmann played a part in its construction.

1. Hélène Cauquil and Marc Bedarida, “Le Corbusier. L’Atelier 35 rue de Sèvres”, *Bulletin d’Informations Architecturales de l’IFA*, Summer 1987. See also A. Roth, *Amusante Erlebnisse eines Architekten* (Zurich: gta/Ammann) 1988, 18.

2. E.g. FLC 17436 (LC 2245, 14/11/1929), FLC 17439 (LC 2248, 30/11/1929), and FLC 17440 (LC 2273, 8/11/1930).

3. Le Corbusier, “The vertical garden city by Le Corbusier [pseud]”, *Architectural Review*, 79, 1936, 9–10.

Introduction

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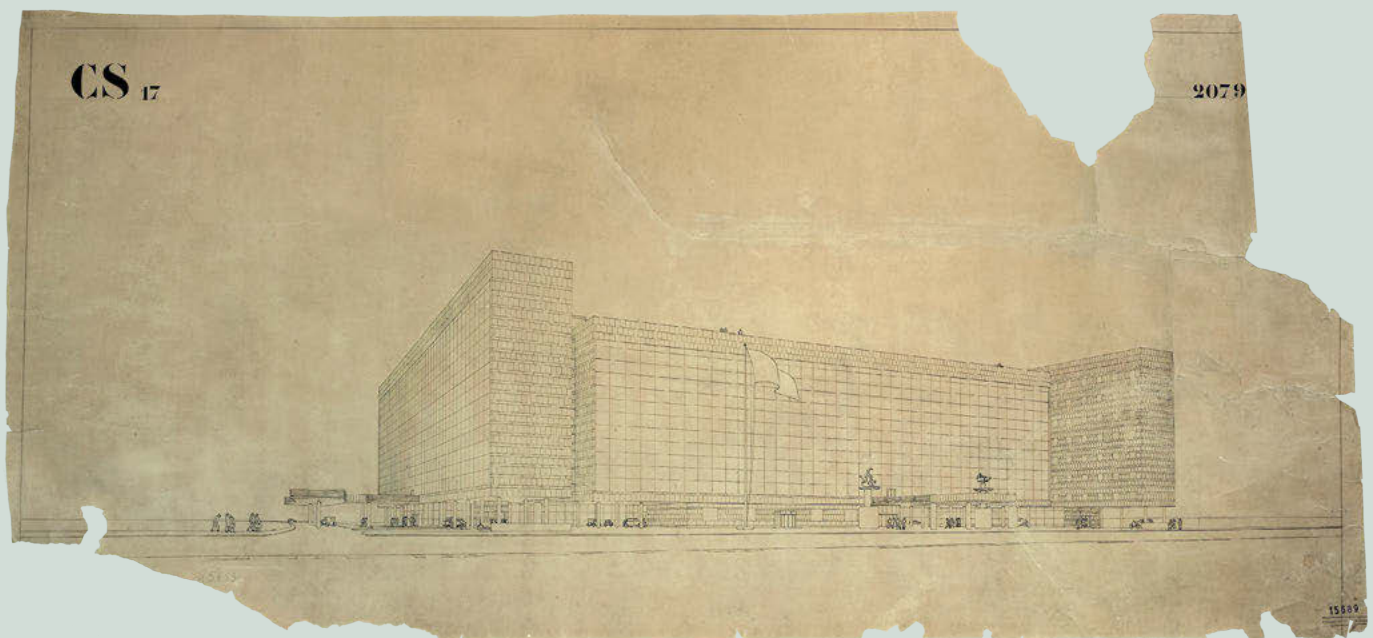
Ernest Weissmann with his camera at the building site of the Villa Savoye, May 1929

In 1929, soon after arriving at the Atelier Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret at 35, rue de Sèvres, the Croatian architect Ernest Weissmann – a “charming boy”, as Le Corbusier describes him to his mother – acquires the new amateur 9.5 mm film camera made by Pathé. The Atelier is a very vibrant place at this time, and its reputation is growing as it obtains for the first time large-scale projects, a process which is reflected in the influx of foreign collaborators. The enthusiasm and the feeling of the exceptional experience at 35, rue de Sèvres prompts Weissmann to capture these moments on film, offering what are today unknown stories behind the canonical architecture history of modernism.

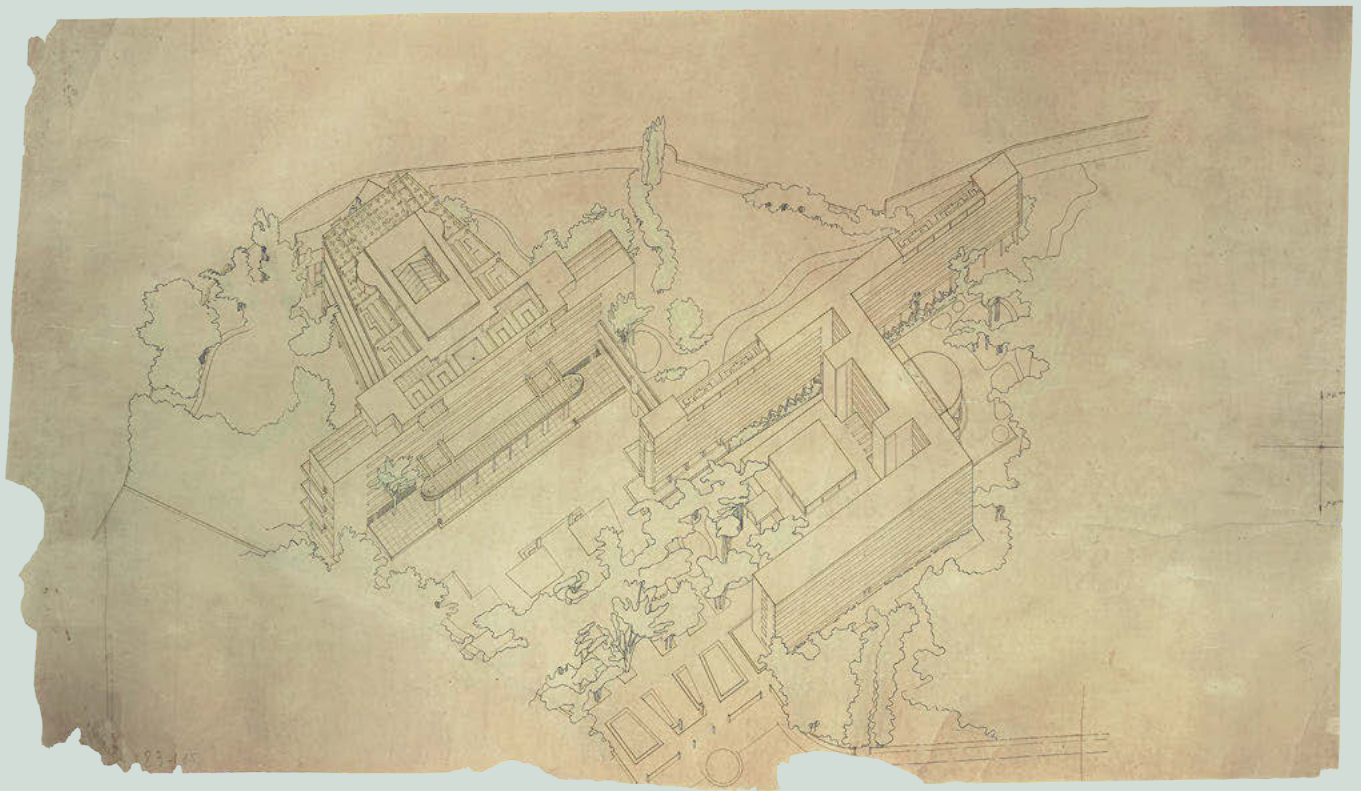
In the introduction of the second volume of the *Œuvre complète*, Le Corbusier wrote about the turn of the decade 1929–1930 that “this year meant to me, to a certain extent, the end of a long period of research for us. 1930 inaugurated a new stage of preoccupations: the great works, the great events of architecture and town planning, the prodigious era of the equipment of a new machine-based civilisation”.¹ Most of the Parisian villas were built, such as the Villa La Roche-Jeanneret, the Villa Planeix, the Villa Cook, and the Villa Stein-de Monzie. The two pavilions of the Villa Church were completed, and the ongoing project for the Villa Savoye had become a reality. The Cité Frugès, an experimental settlement of 50 workers’ houses in Pessac near Bordeaux, was achieved in 1927 and, after first-year problems with the utility services, finally occupied. The competition for the Palace of

the League of Nations in Geneva, and the debacle created by the opaque decision to disqualify Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, occupied the Atelier between 1926 and 1928. It put Le Corbusier definitively on the international map as one of the most prominent architectural figures and led, in June 1928, to the foundation of the CIAM, the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (International Congress of Modern Architecture) in La Sarraz to plead the cause of the new architecture, with Le Corbusier as one of the initiators. The architecture projects Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret obtained shifted in scale. The studies for the Maison Clarté in Geneva for the contractor Edmond Wanner were ongoing, as were, since 1928, the studies for the Centrosoyus project in Moscow, prompting several visits by Le Corbusier to the Russian capital. The commission for the Cité de Refuge of the Salvation Army was signed in 1929 after the Atelier had already carried out the construction of its Palais du Peuple in 1926 and the reconversion project for the Asile Flottant, completed in 1929; the project for the Pavillon Suisse student housing at the Cité Universitaire in Paris was assigned to the architects in 1930. Le Corbusier

1. Boesiger, Willy and Oscar Stonorov, eds. *Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret. Œuvre complète 1929-1934*. (Zurich: Girsberger, 1935), 11.



Perspective of the Centrosoyus
project for Moscow, 1929



Axonometric drawing of the project
for the Palace of the League of
Nations competition in Geneva, 1927

continued his reflections on the modern city after having presented his Plan for a City of 3 Million Inhabitants at the Salon d'Automne in 1922 and his Plan Voisin for Paris in the L'Esprit Nouveau Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in 1925. Further research would culminate a few years later in works and proposals for urban-planning projects – for example, that of the Rive Gauche in Antwerp in 1933. The growing celebrity status of Le Corbusier was reflected in invitations to international conferences, and assisted by his numerous writings. In the autumn of 1929, he travelled for two months to South America for ten lectures on architecture and urbanism, which he published the following year in *Précisions*.² Finally, in September 1929, Le Corbusier also completed the manuscript of what was to become the first volume of a series of eight of the *Œuvre complète*.

Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret could benefit from the enthusiasm of young architects from all over the world who wanted to join one of the most avant-garde architecture offices of that time. When Weissmann arrived at the Atelier Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, it was experiencing its first expansion. Amongst the collaborators at that moment, with many names that became well known afterwards, there was Charlotte Perriand for the furniture and interior design since 1927; Alfred Roth, who arrived the same year from Switzerland until summer 1928; and Kunio Maekawa from Japan, who arrived in 1928. The American Norman Rice, the Swiss Albert Frey, and the Spanish Josep Lluís Sert all arrived with Ernest Weissmann around mid-1928. The Russian Nikolai Kolli arrived in 1929, spending his time between Paris and Moscow. During his internship in the Atelier, Weissmann worked on several of those large-scale projects: the second project for the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva, the execution plans of the Cité de Refuge in Paris, and the execution plans and details of the Centrosoyus project in Moscow.³ He also was in charge of the classification of the photographic collection and the processing of requests for photographs from the Atelier. The collaborators shared an enthusiasm for the exceptional working environment, visits to emblematic building sites, and events in the city. Some photographic memories of evenings at the Atelier testify to the coherence and enthusiasm that bound the collaborators together. Lifelong friendships were created during this period between collaborators who would later go on to have important and international careers, but they also kept in contact with their masters on numerous occasions.

Aware of the exceptionality of the experience at the Atelier, Weissmann would use his newly acquired 9.5 Pathé Baby Motocaméra to capture the experiences and events he was witnessing with his colleagues and friends. This motorized camera model was launched at the end of 1928, five years after the first introduction of a manual amateur camera by Charles Pathé in spring 1923. The compact film camera is described in its manual as “elegant, precise and robust”. Measuring 12 by 12 cm with a thickness of only 6 cm, the camera fits easily in one hand – offering handheld filming. The new model Weissmann bought was equipped with a spring motor, offering more flexible handling freedom, and was a big step forward from the first model, where the film had to be rotated manually. The introduction of this first compact amateur film camera in 1923 came barely six months after the




Motocaméra Pathé-Lux model of 1928, with its spring motor and double cassette, as used by Weissmann

2. Le Corbusier, *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme* (Paris: Les Éditions G. Crès & Cie, 1930).

3. Le Corbusier, Certificat, 5 November 1930, FLC, R3-7-486.

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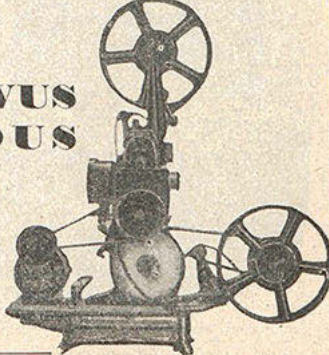
Les Sports d'hiver

REVUS
par TOUS

avec

Pathé-Baby

Le cinéma chez soi



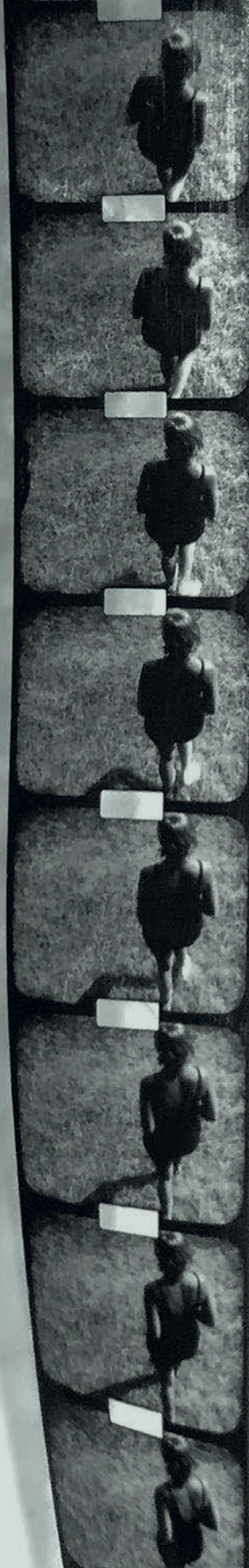
VÉCUS PAR VOUS

EN VENTE CHEZ TOUS LES MARCHANDS D'APPAREILS PHOTOGRAPHIQUES
& 20 bis, RUE LAFAYETTE, PARIS

Publicity in the magazine *La Photo pour tous* (March 1929) on the use of the Pathé Motocaméra for leisure and journeys

launch of the 9.5 mm inflammable silver film "Baby Pathé" for Christmas 1922, with a manually operated projector and a catalogue of titles from the Pathé Film Library including short cuts of major films distributed in cinemas, documentaries and animations as well as newsreels filmed by the Pathé Gazette, to be projected at home – so creating the first home cinema.⁴ The new film format of 9.5 mm was from the beginning imagined as an affordable format, as was the amateur camera. As one 35 mm film can hold three 9.5 mm films, the calculation of the economic gain is rapidly done. The perforations of the 9.5 mm films are positioned in the centre of the film, in between the individual images, so that the image could use the whole width of the film and benefit from the highest possible quality. For the two existing formats of the time, 16 mm and 35 mm, the perforations are typically situated at the edges of the film, limiting the size of the sensitive image. The 9.5 mm format could thus offer quality almost equal to the 16 mm at a significantly lower price. Projecting and filming were done at 16 frames per second – which is much lower than the actual 24 images per second. As a film reel measured about 9 metres, this resulted in a total projection time of about 1 minute 15 seconds. To compensate for the problem of the short duration, the projector could be stopped during intertitles or a fixed shot to increase the total duration of projecting. The camera had an easy-loading system for the double cassette wherein the same film reel, with its short length of 9 metres, was held. The mechanics also allowed filming

4. Anne Gourdet-Mares, "La caméra Pathé-Baby: Le cinéma amateur à l'âge de l'expérimentation", in *L'amateur de cinéma: Un autre paradigme: Histoire, esthétique, marges et institutions*, ed. Valérie Vignaux and Benoît Turquet, Histoire Culturelle (Paris: Afrhc, 2017), 74–93.



at an increased or decreased speed to manipulate a better light exposure for the film. The camera was equipped with a 20 mm 3.5 lens. This being the first handheld amateur camera, its instruction manual leads the user through the apprehension of filming with simple tricks, such as fixed framing for a moving subject, the drawing with chalk of the film frame on the floor, required distances, how to move the camera, necessary speed, etc. A whole new world was opening up for the amateur filmmaker, and he or she needed to be instructed. The distinction between professional and amateur is clearly made by always showing the Pathé Baby camera with a woman. The assumption was: if a woman can operate it, anyone can! Hence, Pathé offered a complete film experience: camera, film and projection apparatus, accompanied by the Pathé Film Library catalogue. The simple handling of the projector and camera; the affordable cost of camera, film, and projector; and the good quality of film contributed to their rapid success. Distributed throughout Europe, including Britain, the 9.5 mm format was produced until the mid-1960s, when it was finally pushed out of the market by the 16 mm and 8 mm formats.

Weissmann filmed more than one hour of footage between 1929 and the mid-1930s. This means that, on average, he bought a film cartridge almost every month. The first filmed sequences taken by Weissmann that have been conserved and identified were taken around May 1929. The last images in Paris were taken a year later, in late spring. In this period of just over a year, Weissmann filmed more than 20 minutes of events at the Atelier, with Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret and with his close colleagues, and covered the whole construction of the Villa Savoye. Weissmann's film footage offers an original document on the working environment of the Atelier and its mode of organization. Weissmann witnesses, together with Pierre Jeanneret, Le Corbusier's first trip by plane; he visits the Villa Stein-de Monzie with his friends; films a working meeting between Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret; participates in the creation of the Mundaneum diorama; accompanies art critic and friend Sigfried Giedion on his visits to Paris and the construction sites of the Villa Savoye and the Asile Flottant barge of the Salvation Army; visits the Salon de l'Automobile; and is present at the fourth CIAM congress in Athens in 1933. These are sequences taken on the spot, in contrast to the well-known professional photographs that were taken of the projects of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. Through his camera, Weissmann achieves an intimate and informal view of Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret in their work and activities, and reveals the convivial relationships with the other collaborators. The desire to capture these unique occasions shows how Weissmann experienced the time at the Atelier as a decisive moment in his life.



Poster on the easy use – by a woman – of the Motocaméra Pathé-Lux, 1928

Opposite page: Unrolled part of a film reel of Weissmann's, which probably depicts his wife, Ingeborg

5. Roger Odin, "La question de l'amateur dans trois espaces de réalisation et de diffusion", *Communications* 68, Le cinéma en amateur, 1999, 47–89.

After leaving the Atelier in October 1930, Weissmann continued to use his camera during the 1930s to film models and projects of his own professional career, such as the competition model for the Foundation Block at Zagreb that he designed in 1929 with Norman Rice and Kunio Maekawa with close references to the Centrosoyus building, capturing the burning of the model after losing the competition; the Sokol sports centre in Pisarovina, which was completed in 1931; or the disassembled model of the 1931–1932 project for the Press Centre with National Theatre hall in Belgrade. Apart from capturing the events of his professional life, Weissmann abundantly filmed his leisure activities – skiing, mountain climbing, swimming, motorbike competitions, soccer games, visits to car exhibitions, etc. – which he did in the company of his masters; his close colleagues; friends and family; and his future wife, Ingeborg. Most of these films remain unexplored. Weissmann continued to film his professional activities after settling in New York in 1939 – for example, the construction of Richard Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in which he participated. The films of his first years in New York were marked by a professionalization: he changed his film format to a 16 mm camera "Bell & Howell Filmo 70D" and used colour film most of the time. This parallels his activities as a professional photographer for a photographic agency

in New York during 1940–1942. His numerous photographs and the catalogues of his images show a person of many qualities, little known until today. On one single occasion, at the *Image of Freedom* exhibition held at the MoMA in New York during winter 1941–1942, the portrait photograph of a worker at the market that he submitted was awarded. Taken on the spot, the photograph is representative of the amateur viewpoint that was already apparent in his films.

Weissmann kept his 9.5 mm amateur films as raw material; no cutting has been done or montage or intertitles added – even if Pathé provided all apparatuses to do so and despite, for example, the repetitive filming of the Villa Savoye. The sequences seen today are as they were filmed: sometimes blurred or jerky, with long or very short sequences. Several sequences show Weissmann himself – proof that he also lent the camera to his colleagues. Some films have different shades of yellow, graininess, or flow stains – indications that Weissmann developed his films himself, or at least did so for some reels. The sequences show a gradual mastering of the use of the camera. The reels include elegant framing, fine compositions, and remarkable scenes. Weissmann's primary aims in using the camera were to record, to manipulate a new technology, and to experiment with its possibilities – in short, to act as a home-movie filmmaker.⁵ The filmed sequences reveal much about the way Weissmann looked through the film camera. His constant concern about



Ascent shot of the ramp at the Villa Savoye by Pierre Chenal, from *Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, 1931

framing confirms his interest and experience in photography. The film footage can be seen merely as moving photographs rather than film. By filming, Weissmann does not act, nor he is considering himself, as a filmmaker but rather as a photographer capturing moments he would otherwise maybe take in photographs. He is not looking for a narrative but for the uniqueness of the events. Just as László Moholy-Nagy referred to some shots of his 1933 film *Architect's Diary* on the CIAM event that year as “family shots”, the filmed events of Weissmann refer to the intimate circle of friendship, as the professional and the amicable were heavily intertwined. But instead of creating a photographic album, in which the pictures can be seen in chronological order of the events, this footage is a loose collections of film reels with, at best, the event or a date written on the box. The chronological order of events in the life of a young architect do not have any importance, but the events in themselves that have been filmed are at the centre of attention. The often careful framing of the sequences and their subject, as well as the duality with the playfulness of the new “toy”, are the main reasons to reproduce here the filmed material as photographs.

Among Weissmann's experimentations with the camera, a visit to the Villa Stein-de Monzie with his close colleagues is appealing for the comprehension of a cinematic view versus an architectural view. Weissmann films, with camera in hand, the ascent of the spiral staircase of the Villa Stein-de Monzie. He films from the point of view of an architect as he climbs the stairs: on a walk. The result is a very hectic, blurred image that constantly rotates during the ascent. It is a literal realization of the architectural walk, which demonstrates that cinema needs another way of representation to visualize the idea of the *promenade architecturale*. By identifying the camera's eye with the human eye, the captured image becomes



Film still from a sequence on the *Graf Zeppelin*, filmed by Le Corbusier when he travelled to Rio de Janeiro from Frankfurt am Main, July 1936

very restricted: moving, blurred, and dark as a result of the limitations of the film, the sensitivity to light, and the framing. This sequence reflects an ignorance of the cinematic codes and techniques of presenting movement through architecture in film, which is to externalize the camera from the filmed movement – as seen, for example, with the visits to the villas in Pierre Chenal's *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* of 1931. Chenal also films the staircase of the Villa Stein-de Monzie but the movement is captured by a person on the stairs, with a fixed camera.

In addition to the reels filmed by Weissmann, some contain documentary films from the Pathé Film Library, such as *Bridges and viaducts*, *Transformers*, *The Acropolis*, *New York* and *Port of Dunkirk: the tooling*. The presence of these films shows that Weissmann also made use of the Pathé film catalogue, with its selection of technical documentaries, and that film viewing was certainly more common in Le Corbusier's entourage than one would think – even if the archives lack evidence of the acquisition of a projector. Indeed, in Le Corbusier's collection of 16 mm films shot between 1936 and 1938 by himself, there is also a small slapstick film. Although the Weissmann archives held a cheap Ciné-Gel 9.5 mm projector of the 1940s, no projector of the 1920s has been found. But it seems more than likely that Weissmann also owned a "Baby Pathé" projector, as he otherwise could not view the films in his possession provided from the Pathé catalogue.

This taste for film in the early decades of the medium's existence is not confined to Weissmann. Internationally, avant-garde architects embraced film and cinema as a new modern art and technique, discussed in their magazines – for example, by Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant in *L'Esprit nouveau*, but also by others in *MA*, *Blaue Reiter*, *Merz*, and *7 Arts*. The admiration for this new technique was not limited to theoretical discussions; the portable camera formats that came

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Quand je suis au cinéma où je me désespère, je songe à Toppfer. Son dessin, du reste, était exquis, exceptionnel. Il faisait cela pour amuser ses élèves et ne songeait pas qu'il était un grand artiste. Goethe, en voyage, de passage à Genève, vit Toppfer et ses dessins et il exigea de lui qu'il les publiât.

DE FAYET.

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