

The Metaphysical Paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and the Latency of Synesthesia

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Le phénomène des synesthésies est
paradoxal.
— Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹

I will open this analysis by drawing attention to two main characteristics of Giorgio de Chirico's lifework as a painter. First, his œuvre consists of a surprisingly large number of different style periods, some occurring simultaneously. Second, it is not only for this reason, but for many others also, that de Chirico can be seen as the Franz Liszt of painting. As in Liszt's repertoire, de Chirico's oeuvre runs through all categories of taste, from banal to sophisticated and from sheer repetition to unique masterpieces.

This analysis will address the following questions: What is the role of time and si-

lence in the melancholy scenes of de Chirico's early "metaphysical period" (1911–1918) and his articles prior to the year 1920, and how can the question of time be seen as a participant or catalyst in the phenomenon of synesthesia in de Chirico's works from between 1911 and 1916? To put it another way: How is it that, involuntarily, we find ourselves at the brink of synesthesia when describing de Chirico's early "enigmatic" works?

The year 2019 delivered a number of important exhibitions in Italy, three big catalogues and two major publications on de Chirico. These projects, however, brought to light a certain curatorial problem, in that, arguably, they were lacking in new interpretations. The concept of metaphysics in de Chirico's work, in particular, has been taken as a given, all too often remaining obscure and unexplained.² Furthermore, the important question of the role of time in de Chirico's

early works has not gained sufficient – nor sufficiently accurate – attention. As far as I am aware, the focus of this essay – synesthesia – has not been addressed.

Such lacunae, however, are in some way symptomatic of de Chirico's reception, if we follow modernist art critic Werner Haftmann's characterization of de Chirico's *pittura metafisica* in the 1960s: "*Pittura metafisica* did not contribute a new kind of painting, but a new vision of things."³ The term "painting" here means that de Chirico did not contribute a new kind of flatness, but only a new kind of illusion, which, according to Haftmann, was probably not so "modern". Nonetheless, such a "new vision of things" demanded a new arrangement of lines and colours, otherwise the surrealists would never have been quite so fascinated by de Chirico's paintings. Haftmann, after all, did not inquire into this fascination in terms of the painted



scene, even though such fascination may have related to atmospheric concerns. If, in fact, de Chirico created a new mood or modality in painting, what was it? Initially, let us call this phenomenon “non-explicit atmospheric symbolism”. And let us suppose that this “symbolism” might imply a new kind of sensitivity for synesthetic metaphors.

In this way I shall ask: What is the sensual coverage of de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings and its implication in terms of inter-sensuous metaphors that bring us close to synesthesia? On observing de Chirico’s painted scenes, we have often pondered over their apparent “silence” and “desertedness” without, however, referring to their metaphoric consequences. That is, we have not spoken about synesthesia.

In his article “Estetica metafisica” (1919), Giorgio de Chirico writes on the metaphysics of the everyday objects we encounter in a city in almost the same way as Jean Baudrillard or Maurice Merleau-Ponty would 40 years later: “In the construction of the city, in the formal structure of architecture, in porticos, railway stations, etc., we can find the principals of the grand metaphysical aesthetics.”⁴ De Chirico seems to refer here to a kind of “low”

metaphysics of everyday life, possibly revealing the influence of the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, with which he was familiar from his early career.⁵ Of this Nietzschean turn, John Sallis has stated (although without mentioning de Chirico): “The inversion that Nietzsche ventured would reverse the order [of Plato’s metaphysics]: What previously was superior, the intelligible, would now be taken as inferior, and its superior position would now be accorded to the sensible.”⁶ De Chirico’s view of the metaphysics of the everyday clearly resonates with this view of the “low”.

Nietzsche’s solution is radical, in the sense that metaphysics usually relates to that which is “above” sensory appearances, above what the ancient Greek thinkers called nature – *physei*.⁷ De Chirico himself states:

I do not see anything disturbing in the word “metaphysics”; it is the very tranquility and nonsensical beauty of matter (*materia*) that appears “metaphysical” to me – and even more metaphysical are certain objects, which for their clarity of colour and the exactness of their measurements appear to me as the antipode of all confusion and indistinctness.⁸

De Chirico continues thus to explain his views in the article “Noi metafisici” (We Metaphysicians): “Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were the first to teach of the profound non-sense

of life and how such non-sense can be transmuted into art, [...] in fact, how such non-sense should form the intimate skeleton of an art that is truly new, free and profound.”⁹ Indeed, this “non-sense” must at least be seen in a sensual and sensible way. According to de Chirico’s metaphysics, a human being cannot be something outside of one’s own empirical life.¹⁰ In fact, what Nietzsche really meant by metaphysics is paradoxically conditional. According to Nietzsche, the apparent world [...] is full of contradiction.”¹¹ It may be that de Chirico’s idea of the “spectral evocation of useless objects”¹² comes closer to Nietzsche’s idea of the tension between the real and the metaphysical world. Nonetheless, de Chirico’s idea of metaphysics seems to be totally his own, a kind of open idiosyncrasy, declared thus: “We metaphysicians have sanctified reality!”¹³

According to Silvia Pegoraro, the metaphysical does not find the authentic reason for its existence from the transcendental – which deflates all objects – but, rather, finds it from the “pulsating fundamental reality in which objects themselves have been dressed.”¹⁴ Ultimately, de Chirico’s view on



metaphysics inverted Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's idea of music as the only medium capable of epitomizing Dionysian inebriation, assuring that it is precisely painting which can achieve it.¹⁵ Naturally, the consequences of this kind of "intertextual" inebriation cannot be other than synesthetic.

We can make a comparison without restraint. In the same way as Nietzsche thought that philosophy could renew itself only from outside philosophy,¹⁶ de Chirico sensed that painting could only be renewed from outside the advanced contemporary painting of his time, rooted in Cézanne's art.¹⁷ It is most likely that de Chirico hated the rapidly growing Cézanne-discourse of his time, while not necessarily all of Cézanne's paintings.¹⁸

It is well-known that in the titles of his works de Chirico frequently uses the terms "melancholy" and "enigma," most notably, *Solitude (Melancholy)* (1912, Fig. 1), *Melancholy of the Beautiful Day* (1913), and *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914, Fig. 2). Evidently, paintings about enigmas abound, so I refer here only to the most outstanding works, such as *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (1910), *The Enigma of the Hour* (1911), *The Enigma of a Day* (1914; Fig. 4),

and *The Enigma of Departure* (1914). His paintings of piazzas are various, and yet, despite the public nature of this arena, the feeling for enigmatic isolation prevails. This leads to a fundamental tension in the piazza-metaphysics of de Chirico: expansion of space vs. micro-figures within the scene.

Enigmatic Silence

De Chirico clearly makes a connection between melancholy and enigma, of which Paolo Thea has remarked: "The instability of the equilibrium between desire and melancholy can be resolved by the formulation of enigmas."¹⁹ We can assume that without a sense of the empty piazza in de Chirico's works, there might not exist a space for the kind of enigma he wanted to depict. Enigmas seem to demand a strange kind of air around themselves. However, we must also keep in mind that the enigma in de Chirico's paintings is the enigma of objects, the enigma of the fact that objects are almost as important as human beings. Any transcendence between these two entities is still obscure. We see a tiny man seeking a possibility to adapt to the situation in the flat square. The enigma of the object is in this case the

enigma of the threshold of the sacred. Sacred objects are things in slumber, and figures are communicable only via objects within the piazza. This is especially evident in a series of paintings from 1912 to 1913, in particular the pictures in which Ariadne is the main subject matter (*Solitude [Melancholy]*, 1912, Fig. 1; *The Delights of the Poet*, 1912, Fig. 3; *The Lassitude of the Infinite*, 1912, and *Ariadne*, 1913, Fig. 5).

The sacred, however, does not actually reveal itself, leaving an impression that the forms or figures of a painting primarily belong to the painted surface itself and communicate their reference only in a secondary sense (like the concept of the intransitive symbol in German Romanticism). The sacred can create a world of objects without faces. But when enigma serves the function of the sacred it increases the feeling of desertedness, and in this way conquers the semantic space. Another dimension of this feeling for the sacred is that of petrification: as in most of the piazza scenes, it easily paves its way for an enigma. The real functional context for an enigma can only be the *empty place* between certain objects, which as such is always illusory, both visually and



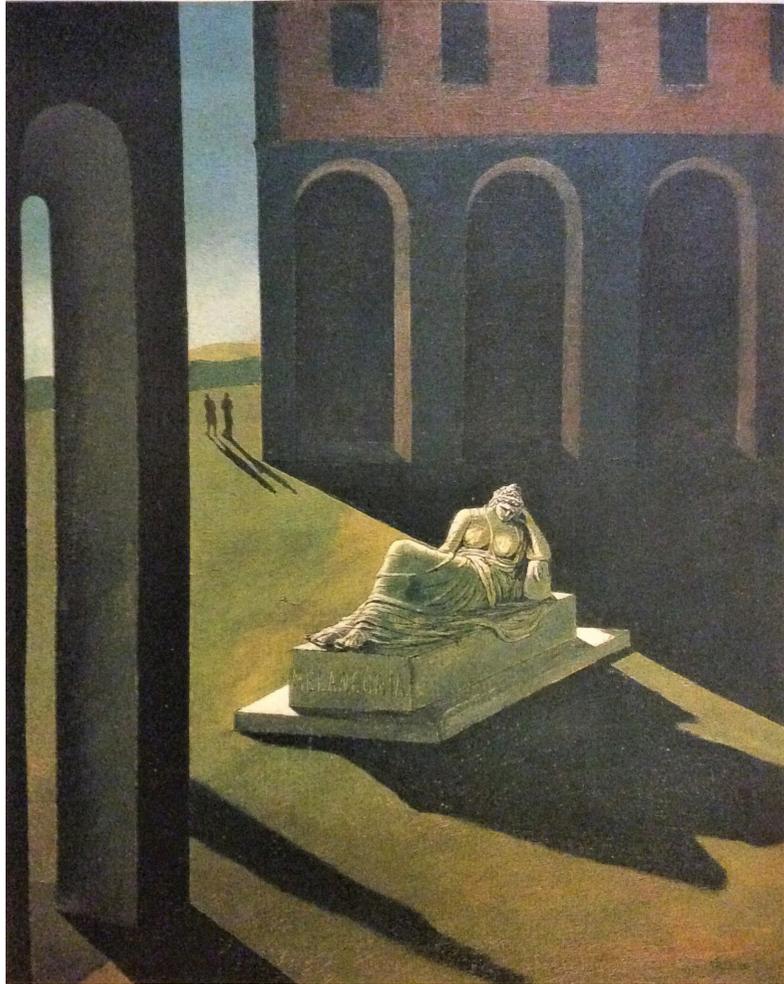


Figure 1. Giorgio de Chirico, *Solitude (Melancholy)*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 77 x 63,5 cm. Private Collection. Source: Paolo Baldacci, *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period 1888-1919* (Boston & New York: A Bulfinch Press, 1997), first page.



Figure 2. Giorgio de Chirico, *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 85 x 69 cm. Private Collection. Source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/giorgio-de-chirico/mystery-and-melancholy-of-a-street-1914>. Accessed 30.12. 2020.





Figure 3. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Delights of the Poet*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 69,5 x 86,3 cm. Esther Grether Family Collection. Photo: Altti Kuusamo.





Figure 4. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of a Day*, 1914. Oil on canvas, 83 x 130 cm. MAC USP Collection, Sao Paulo. Photo: Altti Kuusamo.



Figure 5. Giorgio de Chirico, *Ariadne*, 1913. Oil and graphite on canvas, 135,3 x 180,3 cm. Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.





Figure 6. Giorgio de Chirico, *Metaphysical Interior with Lighthouse*, 1918. Oil on canvas, 48,5 x 37 cm. Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Turin. Photo: Altti Kuusamo.

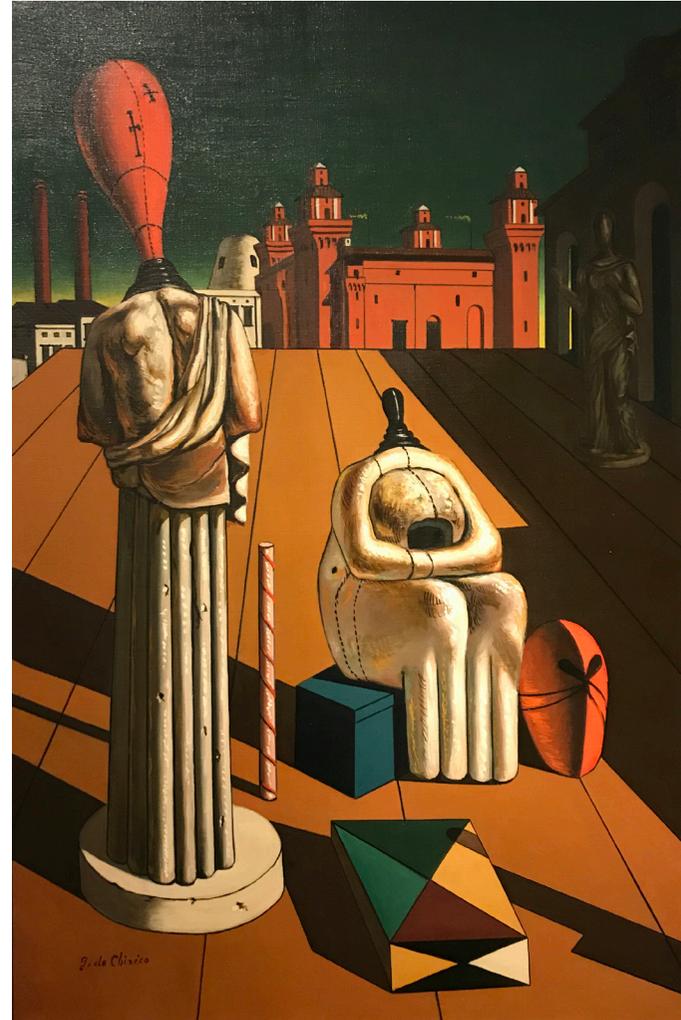


Figure 7. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Disquieting Muses*, late 1950s. Oil on canvas, 97 x 66 cm. Collezione Roberto Casamonti, Florence. Photo: Altti Kuusamo.



modally. Something which is in-between the objects is always illusorily transparent, although the whole scene might seem petrified. This may appear a paradox, or at least a tension. There exists, therefore, a conflict between transparent atmosphere and petrified objects. In such a way, the emptiness between heavy objects may well increase the sense of immobility – and silence.

Enigmas and the enigmatic in de Chirico's oeuvre during the 1910s is connected to the problem of identity and (wo)man's uncertain place in the world.²⁰ Nonetheless, we might ask: What kind of a representational context creates a feeling of alienation – alienation being so often enigmatic? Moreover, do we need more than one sensual metaphor to grasp the enigmatic in de Chirico? Or can it be born from the polarity or borderline between secular and metaphysical? According to Adriano Altamira, “the idea of disarticulating everyday meanings through surprise and alienation [...] derives from symbolist origins.”²¹ This might be true, and yet the discrepancy remains between the secular and the sacred.

It should be clear that the metaphorical borderline in de Chirico's pictures exists between secular and eternal, and that the

“metaphorical dimension” changes all secular objects to timeless objects. The empty surface of the piazza, then, increases the feeling of timelessness or the sacred. We may even observe that the metaphysical is the instance which changes phenomena into enigmas. Jean Baudrillard has proposed that an enigma is not at all as unintelligent as a secret: “There is no need to uncover the enigma. It is seduction, the exhibits of which are inexplicable.”²² Three factors are easily drawn to one another in de Chirico's piazza scenes: time, enigma and the sacred. These three seem to commune with silence, which, of course, we cannot see in the picture but can sense *via* haptic associations. There is also a curious tension between the clear or almost simple pictorial language and the enigmatic content of the picture. Enigma, then, would seem to have something to do with illusory emptiness (transparency) in de Chirico's paintings.

Enigma has a mysterious power to *stop* the beholder from meditation. Joseph Vogl has introduced the concept of tarrying (Germ. *das Zaudern*). According to him, tarrying not only refers to hesitation, pause, indecisiveness or the state of frustration, a kind of mel-

ancholy mood, but it also “can be recognized as the active gesture of inquiry”²³ – and even a reflective interruption.²⁴ Tarrying is a poetic state, which can prolong meditation. With this in mind, many of de Chirico's piazza scenes can be understood as a quasi-empty field for tarrying: they seem to offer a pause. We could even speak of a *synesthetic tarrying under the sign of enigma*.

In the lightness of the clean and pure piazza, we perceive long galleries with arches and heavy statues looking away, towards emptiness. The emptiness of the piazza correlates to namelessness – and namelessness correlates to the fact that we can't see individual faces, only Ariadne's mourning and downcast look in the painting *Solitude (Melancholy)*, Fig.1). This is a picture of an abandoned world, one of which Kathleen Toohey writes as portraying a “sense of loss”.²⁵ Vincenzo Trione suggests that in de Chirico's piazza scenes the exterior is represented as interior – “interiorita esterna” (2009, 74).²⁶ This brings to mind the extract in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* in which the protagonist declares: “Es gibt kein Aussen! [...] Für jede Seele ist jede andere Seele ein Hinterwelt.” (There is no out-



side! [...] For every soul, every other soul is an after-world).²⁷ Perhaps the Nietzschean concept of *Hinterwelt* – existential by its very nature – connects metaphysics with melancholy. In de Chirico's words, the question is one of "the absence of the human in man."²⁸

In de Chirico's townscapes, empty space is always public space, yet unoccupied by people (Figs. 1, 2, 3). As such these spaces can be seen as a dreamy or even hallucinatory private sphere in which only clocks represent public time. So often in the so-called "time literature" of the early twentieth century, protagonists fight against public time, as exemplified in the narratives of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.²⁹ David Hoy has observed: "Once time is thoroughly secularized, temporality becomes visible."³⁰ What Hoy's idea implies here is that time can be sensed in a synesthetic way. How it fits to de Chirico's paintings, is yet to be seen. The secular and the sacred meet in de Chirico's oeuvre in the way that made Jean Cocteau speak about *mystère laïc*, secular mystery.³¹

A strange feeling of isolation is often noted of de Chirico's pictures. Isolation implies solitude; a keyword of de Chirico's metaphysical period (1911–1918). De Chirico thus dis-

tinguished between the plastic solitude and the solitude of dreams in the following way:

Every profound work of art contains two solitudes: one which could be called its plastic solitude which is the contemplative beatitude given us by the exceptional construction and combination of shapes [...] "still life" [...] in its spectral aspect [...]; the second solitude would be that of dreams, an eminently *metaphysical solitude* (italics, AK) which excludes *a priori* all possible logic of a visual or educational origin.³²

There is also the other name for *the second solitude*: "the solitude of signs, or metaphysics" (*solitudine dei segni, o metafisica*).³³ Solitude is connected to silence, and they meet unavoidably in de Chirico's piazza scenes.

The expression "silence" is frequently employed in descriptions of paintings from de Chirico's metaphysical period. In fact, the sense of silence opens a broad and yet half-obscure route to understanding synesthesia in de Chirico's paintings – in ways which are often preconsciously conceived. It means that a form of dumb synesthesia is all the time lurking behind the essayistic or scientific descriptions of de Chirico's paintings, without any conscious or systematic effort to mention or problematize this elusive process of synesthesia. It is as if it only awaits

our perceptual remarks to make its appearance. Octavio Paz has observed: "For men are made in such a way that silence is also language for us."³⁴ In de Chirico's paintings silence can also be sensed as a dumb language; indeed, it is as if it might ascend from the empty ground of the illusory piazza. We recall that Carlo Carrà, in his manifesto *La Pittura dei suoni, rumori e odori* (*The Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells*, 1913), makes clear that "silence is static" and that the manifest also wants to negate the use of horizon line and "all static forms," such as pyramids and cubes.³⁵ It seems that de Chirico, in spite of a mutual interest in synesthesia with Carrà, wanted to perform exactly the opposite: make pictures in which the "static silence" prevails!

Descriptions of de Chirico's paintings reveal many telling details. Francesco Poli states: "The metaphysical scene is pervaded by an immobile, rarefied, silent atmosphere, by the strange absence of action and by a mysterious sense of expectation";³⁶ and: "The mystery of space is strictly correlated to the mystery of time".³⁷ Silvia Pegoraro published an article titled "Nel silenzio del reale. Il realismo metafisico di Giorgio de Chirico" (In



the Silence of Reality: The Metaphysical Realism of Giorgio de Chirico), in a book titled *Giorgio de Chirico. Maestoso silenzio* (“majestic silence”). Pegoraro states: “Silence speaks in de Chirico’s images through vivid carvings of the mind. Perhaps his art troubles us precisely because it shows the material root (*la radice sensibile*) of thought.”³⁸ In a similar vein, Vincenzo Trione states: “Everything is in an immobile state. There are no voices. Only silence...”³⁹ Jean Clair describes de Chirico’s paintings in familiar terms, but perhaps more poetically: “A solitary place weighted by silence which intrudes into thick shadows.”⁴⁰ Silence also reaches the figures represented in the scenes, what Poli calls the “[i]mmobile and silent presence of single figures”.⁴¹

We can sense here, perhaps, a new type of union of time, space and action, different from Aristotle’s. This triplet dwells in de Chirico’s painting without the third, action – which, nonetheless, still seems present. In his paintings we encounter an atmosphere in which plastic stability can illustrate modal instability in terms of presence or timelessness.

In many descriptions, the expressions such as isolation (solitude), emptiness, de-

sertedness and silence form a conceptual chain whereby these terms irresistibly require one another. Jean Clair speaks of a “*vacuum semantique*”, a semantic vacuum, in de Chirico’s scenes.⁴² And yet, even the empty spaces may be full of formal or non-explicit symbolic meanings, e.g., semantics. The feeling of depersonalization – referred to many times in relation to de Chirico’s work – hints at an atmosphere, in potential semantically rich with half-blind guesses. Inevitably, we fill emptiness with our descriptive terms and our associative hints. In such a way, solitude connotes silence, silence connotes emptiness, and emptiness connotes the slow duration of time, or even the *fermata* of time. This might suggest a kind of common agreement, in all its strangeness, that silence is associated with emptiness and clean surfaces. In her essay “The Aesthetics of Silence,” Susan Sontag connects silence with emptiness and reduction.⁴³ She also emphasizes that “silence is a metaphor for a cleansed, non-interfering vision,” and as such the “spectator can approach art as he does a landscape”.⁴⁴ Although Sontag does not mention synesthesia or de Chirico, her testimony of the certain metaphoric dimen-

sion of silence is witness to a common habit – be its origin mysterious or not.

Time, Senses and Synesthesia

Silence refers to one of the principal senses. Traditionally we have learned that there are five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. In Alois Riegl’s sense, touch can also be understood as a haptic dimension. Of course, the weight of silence is the most important factor here; and so, there is an unbearable heaviness of silence in de Chirico’s images from the 1910s, a fact which has been reiterated many times.

Now, however, we may ask, what is missing? Presumably, the sense of time. Time does not belong to the category of the five senses, and yet we *sense* the flow of time. We only need to know that the sense of time is a metaphor. After describing the power of silence, Francesco Poli writes about “solitude, immobility and stasis, an enigmatic suspension of the temporal dimension”.⁴⁵ Somehow the notion of silence in de Chirico’s scenes (of the metaphysical period) gives an impression of timelessness or *rallentando* of time. Eugenio Borgna also refers to de Chirico’s suspended time in which petrified



melancholy prevails: “Time has stopped.”⁴⁶ The question of timelessness touches the problem of infinity. Baldacci refers to de Chirico’s “metaphysical” statement: “The nostalgia of the infinite is revealed beneath the geometric precision of the piazzas.”⁴⁷ Moreover, de Chirico himself said: “In geometrical shapes one can see symbols of the upper reality.”⁴⁸ Infinity: a constant, if not “eternal” problem for de Chirico.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty thus accentuates: “Time is not a real process, not an actual succession that I am content to record. It arises from *my* relation to things.”⁴⁹ This statement implies that the synesthetic potential of time is in the hands (eyes) of the beholder. What the subject needs is to experience time *via* some preconceived metaphorical context. Diagrammatically, this would appear as: isolation, emptiness, and silence. Time is curiously connected to this chain of sentiments and could pave the way for understanding the mythic dimension of time in these cool piazza scenes.

We cannot see or hear time, we only see visual or other signs or correlations of time and timelessness; some of those are conventional and shared (the signs of a clock),

some arise from synesthetic experience: movement, silence, isolation, desertedness, emptiness, illusory flatness. We can approach synesthesia from many different angles, and synesthesia is probably approaching us, in tricky preconscious ways. There is a common and even weird ground between our expectations or associations and a picture.

What an image itself offers to us is difficult to ascertain. Many descriptions of de Chirico’s paintings bring about preconscious synesthetic expectations so quick that the problem itself does not rise to the surface. Yet, the word silence in most cases *calls for* timelessness. This is a mystery, so often discussed, and perhaps it is a mystery of our share, our capacity to make synesthetic projections, our preconscious readiness to sense inter-sensuous metaphors. For example, the long shadows of time in the painting *Solitude (Melancholy)*, from the year 1912 (Fig. 1).

Mystery may well be a key word here. E. H. Gombrich, “the Popperian”, uses the expression “the mood of mystery” when referring to de Chirico’s “dreamlike visions of deserted city squares, where the harsh

shadows cast by the statue and solitary figures add to the sense of disquiet”.⁵⁰ He refers to *The Enigma of a Day* (1914; Fig. 4) to illustrate the matter. In this painting, a shadow cuts the piazza, like a knife, in the lower right corner – an effect in sharp contrast to the soft forms of arches, chimney and tower.

We can see the problem in the opposite way and assume that the sense of time in visual arts would be almost the same kind of catalyst of synesthetic experiences as language is in the world of sounds. (We may remember Gombrich’s famous “ping and pong” test: Mozart “ping” and Beethoven “pong”, Watteau “ping”, Rembrandt “pong”).⁵¹ It is easy to keep up: ice cream “ping”, pork sauce “pong”). We can also think that time sensed in a picture is the same kind of catalyst that phonetic associations would be when looking at pictures. There might, therefore, be a weak parallelism between these two operations. In fact, *The Enigma of a Day* (Fig. 4) leads us to the problem of Gestalt theory in psychology.

Wolfgang Köhler, a representative of German Gestalt theory, introduced in 1929 the classic dichotomy of the synesthetic opposition between the forms “maluma”



and “takete”. According to Köhler, there is a strong tendency to associate jagged shapes to the word “takete” and soft, rounded shapes to the word “maluma”.⁵² It is quite obvious that we associate the arches and rounded objects of de Chirico’s dreamy piazza with “maluma”: soft angles, towers, statues, Ariadne recumbent with her more or less fluid forms. All these forms have a dark counterpart, hard-edged “takete” shadows, as for example in the painting *Solitude (Melancholy)* (Fig. 1) and *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (Fig. 2). There are no hard edges to be seen in those areas which depict elements in daylight, but in the form of a shadow we meet “takete” – and paradoxically – the flow of time. Perhaps this communication between dark and light, between sharp and soft brings us to the “edge” of the synesthetic association of touch.

After his early metaphysical period, de Chirico created many paintings which open up a hard-edged view to the cramped cupboard – and *mirabile dictu*: the feeling for synesthesia disappears in the beholder’s mind, as in *Metaphysical Interior with Lighthouse*, 1918 (Fig. 6). Of course, we can say that these paintings are noisy, but this kind of

description tends not to appear in critiques. The dense object theatre in these “metaphysical interiors” is also compressed in opposition to the wide extensions of the piazza scenes.

If music can create, as Rousseau said, the *image* of quiet,⁵³ it may be even easier for a plain visual scene. It so happens that de Chirico’s pictures could be the lightest way to synesthesia, so easy that we can start immediately to speak of silence. That which passes over in silence is too close – and descriptions are silent about it, leading to the synesthetic potential of silence. Of course, we can start to shape synesthesia by thinking of it as a chain of sense associations. However, according to Herman Parret and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it is better to speak of communication among the different senses.⁵⁴ They both emphasize that “the visible and the audible synesthetically ‘communicate’ on the basis of fundamental *touch*”.⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty even speaks about the “intercommunication” of the senses.⁵⁶ The sense of touch is quick, and yet abstract at the same time. We “touch” the scene by adjusting our body as beholders – easily – to the opening perspective of the stony piazza, and the “world”

opens *via* the hard and silent scene of the piazza.⁵⁷ In de Chirico’s case, the “flesh of the world”⁵⁸ has turned to a hard ground for the petrified and mute illusory objects.

The main question would now be: How do the visual signs guarantee a feeling of silence and timelessness in de Chirico’s painted scenes? The empty piazza launches a chain of entities: silence, isolation, desertedness, slow duration. The train far on the horizon paradoxically increases the motionless atmosphere and acts as the waning opposite of the silent piazza (*The Delights of the Poet*, Fig. 3). Deserted silence also gives an impression of oppression or the uncanny. In this sense, impulse, which unites the metaphysics of solitude to melancholy, is a kind of semi-uncanny atmosphere of emptiness and isolation. The only sign of noise comes stifled from far along the horizon. Long shadows and feelings of solitude strongly evoke the sense of melancholy. We might even say that melancholy dwells between the shadows in many of the piazza views.

The Petrified World

It is often observed that de Chirico’s scenes are in some way petrified.⁵⁹ Sculptures,



stony ground, arcades and immobile figures certainly appear to petrify the scene. According to Jean Starobinski, the petrification of a scene or its elements is a sign of melancholy.⁶⁰ He states that it is evident in particular in de Chirico's *Solitude (Melancholy)*, in which the opacity of a statue disseminates silence *blindly* (my italics) around itself. Starobinski adds "sa présence produit de l'absence" (its presence creates absence) and suggests that the heavy and compact statue of Ariadne situated in the silent plaza "redoubles the silence".⁶¹

The stony atmosphere connotes dream, and dream connotes metaphysics – as de Chirico sees it.⁶² The shadows of melancholy seem to be "metaphysically" long. Shadows accompany a timeless phenomenon of petrification. Indeed, there is no petrification without long shadows in de Chirico's pictures. They need each other in a way that seemed to be unique and new at that time: shadows hit the hard, plain and empty ground. The sense of petrification obviously needs empty space and the feeling of open air. But it is not enough: when we say "petrification" we are in the sensory realm of touch! Moreover, the plain, clean, smooth piazza self-evident-

ly arouses this haptic sense. It may also underline the feeling of silence, in fact in an apparent, even dull way, thereby presenting us with an *affective* playground. When different sense-information synesthetically gathers, it increases affective impulses.⁶³ This transposition of one sensory level to another is naturally imaginative, and thereby metaphoric by nature.

In this sense, de Chirico's piazza scenes attune us to the state in which chains of several sense-impressions connect to one another to shape or ornate the enigma difficult to solve. We can only say that silence has a big task: as a representative of sound by its lack, silence is in fact a common denominator of all the senses, and thereby a necessary cousin of time.

When looking at de Chirico's piazza scenes, we pass illusory objects and look at the synesthetic space of meaning: associations of loneliness, silence and timelessness. Louis Marin has introduced a concept of *syncope* in painting, speaking of "ruptures, interrupters, syncopes, silence," which create a "blank space" within a representation. Marin refers to Poussin's use of transparent planes in a picture by which our gaze would

travel.⁶⁴ One could also say that syncopation is the moment of suspension here (as in music), and suspension of time, when looking at an object in the illusory piazza. In this case, syncopation is a kind of perceptual process which aids our synesthetic associations.

According to Gillo Dorfles, we can speak of intervals or *diastemes* between objects and events: in modern cultures they are on the edge of disappearing, merging.⁶⁵ In this sense, de Chirico's piazza scenes really keep up these intervals in a "premodern way" – opposite to his cupboard paintings of the late 1910s.

The mouth of the oracle is open, but we can't hear her voice. Haptic turns out to be optic, silence turns out to be an instant of time meaning timelessness. In all the characterizations of silence in de Chirico's metaphysical paintings, writers refer to a very slow duration of time. Slow time thus has its clear connection to synesthetic impression. That is why we have to be precise and take into account "the magic" of the plain surface of the piazza: a deserted surface, a pure illusory plain, which is easy to see as metaphysical and dreamy.⁶⁶ The plain piazza seems to form a *ground of resonance for our synesthetic projections*.



It suggests a kind of virtual recuperation of synesthesia via the imaginary sense of touch in the mind of the beholder.

There are depictions of shadows and silhouettes of people in de Chirico's canvases that refer to something which is untouchable or virtual, to the elements of possibility which intensify the sense of enigma. In some scenes in particular, we cannot see the sources of the shadows (Figs. 2, 5), having the effect of doubling the enigmatic tension. It can be observed that the horizontal and the vertical dimensions in de Chirico's scenes meet in the diagonal signs of shadows. The longer the shadow the slower the duration of time, and the longer the feeling of expectation – a feeling which has nothing to do with the real empirical reality in which longer shadows move faster. In a Nietzschean way, the suprasensory (metaphysical dimension), as Heidegger says, can “eliminate the sensory and thereby the difference between them”.⁶⁷

Usually, de Chirico aimed to avoid the underlining of visually disquieting feelings. However, he made a discrepancy between silence, immobility and virtual disquiet. This tension can best be seen in *The Disquieting Muses* from 1918 (Fig. 7). The tensions of

forms in the figures, between the figures, and, in the end, the awful repetition of this scene: *The Disquieting Muses* was made nineteen times, a disquieting repetition indeed.

What de Chirico aimed at was to represent the spatial metaphors of timelessness, the old dream of Western metaphysics from Parmenides to Hegel, or what Hannah Arendt defined as the “timeless region”: “an eternal presence in complete quiet, lying beyond human clocks and calendars altogether, the region – precisely, of thought?”⁶⁸

In the mid-1920s, we witness a total inversion of size in de Chirico's scenes. He places architecture inside the body, thus increasing the haptic dimension. In some paintings a body lies in a cramped wardrobe, and happily, the problem of time vanishes along with long shadows. Paintings are even placed inside paintings, and the view opened to the outside from within, thereby multiplying the different grades of representation. Curiously, however, the feeling of synesthesia disappears.

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This is not to say that some kind of complete synesthesia would be possible in

de Chirico's wide piazzas. The point being, rather, that certain signs that serve the sense of desertedness provide the impulse for the whole chain of associations prompted in the viewer. When looking at de Chirico's silent scenes we are on the brink of synesthesia, with the sense of time playing a catalyzing role. Ultimately, the question is one of metaphysical recuperation: de Chirico's pictures launch *metaphysical questions in the viewer's mind*.

The atmosphere of these paintings is strangely filled with synesthesia, as reflected in the descriptive language of so many critics. Is this, then, the key effect that creates the enigma of de Chirico's scenes that has drawn so much attention? But we need language here. It is not only a feeling of synesthesia in the viewer's mind, but also a latent state of synesthesia, even in de Chirico's mind. Furthermore, the artist aimed to create this feeling preconsciously, inspired by the synesthetic machine of the Wagnerian total *Kunstwerk*. In the end, the idea of a total *Kunstwerk* brings us to the brink of synesthesia.

A final word: what is enigmatic in the early paintings of de Chirico is, essentially, the



easiness of the synesthetic work. And this synesthetic operation provides us with the keys to be *affected* by the close communication of the senses alongside an inefably slow temporality. Indeed, what really demands our attention is the metaphysical “becoming”: what we cannot perceive but only imagine or anticipate.

Notes

- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 274.
- 2 Exhibitions in Italy (Genua, Parma, Milan) have produced exhibition catalogues which mainly repeat familiar research material. To look further: Victoria Noel-Johnson, ed., *Giorgio de Chirico: The Changing Face of Metaphysical Art* (Milan: Skira, 2019); Luca Massimo Barbero, ed., *De Chirico* (Milan: Palazzo Reale; Venice: Marsilio, 2019); Alice Ensabella and Stefano Roffi, eds., *De Chirico – Savinio. Una mitologia moderna* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2019).
- 3 Werner Haftman, *Painting in the Twentieth Century. Volume One: An Analysis of the Artists and Their Works* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 174.
- 4 Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti di Giorgio de Chirico [1918–1943]. Commedia dell’arte moderna. Giorgio de Chirico & Isabella Fair*, ed. Jole de Sanna (Milan: Abscondita, 2002), 31.
- 5 Giorgio de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita* (Milan: Bompiani, 1998), 75; cf. Paolo Baldacci, *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period 1888–1919* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1997), 87–88; cf. Fabio Benzi, *Giorgio de Chirico. La vita e l’opera* (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2019), 78–79.
- 6 John Sallis, *Transfigurements: On the True Sense of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 16.
- 7 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 10–11.
- 8 Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti di Giorgio de Chirico*, 30.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 18; cf. *Giorgio de Chirico, Lettere 1909–1929*, ed. Elena Potiggia (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2018), 52.
- 11 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 310–311, § 579; cf. § 462, 488, 574.
- 12 Giorgio de Chirico, *Scritti di Giorgio de Chirico*, 18.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 14 Silvana Pegoraro, “Nel silenzio del reale. Il realismo metafisico di Giorgio de Chirico,” *Giorgio de Chirico. Un maestoso silenzio*, eds. Roberto Alberton and Silvia Pegoraro (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2011), 36.
- 15 Baldacci, *De Chirico*, 263.
- 16 See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone Press, 1983).
- 17 De Chirico, *Scritti di Giorgio de Chirico*, 111–119.
- 18 Cf. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, 159.
- 19 Paolo Thea, “De Chirico and the Disclosure of the Myth,” *De Chirico and the Mediterranean*, ed. Jole de Sanna (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 34.
- 20 Cf. Francesco Poli, “Giorgio de Chirico: From Avant-Gardist to Maverick. Seventy Years of Metaphysical Research,” *De Chirico and the Mediterranean*, ed. Jole de Sanna (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 68. In the article “Convulsive Identity” Hal Foster clarifies the unheimlich-dimension of identity using Freud’s three hypotheses of urphantasy. He refers to de Chirico’s concepts of “revelation, surprise, enigma and fatality”. Foster states: “Clearly his topos is the estrangement that comes of repression and returns as enigma, an enigma which he once referred to as ‘the great question one has always asked oneself why the world was created, why I was born, live and die...’” Hal Foster, “Convulsive Identity,” *October* no. 57 (Summer 1991): 25.
- 21 Adriano Altamira, “De Chirico and Duchamp,” *Metafisica* no. 5–6 (2006): 83.
- 22 Jean Baudrillard, *Les Stratégies fatales* (Paris: Grasset, 1983), 117.
- 23 Joseph Vogl, *On Tarrying*, trans. Helmut Müller-Sievers (London: Seagull Books, 2011), 18.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 25 Kathleen Toohey, “Giorgio de Chirico, Time, Odysseus, Melancholy, and Intestinal Disorder,” in *Peter Toohey, Melancholy, Love and Time*:



- Boundaries of the Self in Ancient Literature* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2004), 291.
- 26 Vincenzo Trione, *Giorgio de Chirico. La città del silenzio architettura, memoria, profezia* (Milan: Skira, 2009), 74.
- 27 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Also sprach Zarathustra," *Werke 2* (Cologne: Könnemann, 1994), 307.
- 28 De Chirico, *Scritti di Giorgio de Chirico*, 29.
- 29 Theodore Ziolkowsky, *Dimensions of the Modern Novel: German Texts and European Contexts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 199.
- 30 David Couzens Hoy, *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 161.
- 31 Jean Cocteau, "Le Mystère laïc" (*Giorgio de Chirico*) (Paris: Éditions des Quatre Chemins, 1928).
- 32 De Chirico, *Scritti di Giorgio de Chirico*, 29.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Octavio Paz, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: An Introduction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 94.
- 35 Carlo Carrà, "La Pittura dei suoni, rumori e odori. 11 agosto 1913," in *Manifesti futuristi*, ed. Guido Bonino (Milan: pillole BUR, 2009), 88.
- 36 Poli, "Giorgio de Chirico," 68.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Pegoraro, "Nel silenzio del reale," 41.
- 39 Trione, *Giorgio de Chirico*, 75.
- 40 Jean Clair, *Malinconia. Motifs saturniens dans l'art de l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 67.
- 41 Poli, "Giorgio de Chirico," 68.
- 42 Clair, *Malinconia*, 101.
- 43 Susan Sontag, *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 187.
- 44 Ibid., 191.
- 45 Poli, "Giorgio de Chirico," 68.
- 46 Eugenio Borgna, "La malinconia e il tempo sospeso," in *Il settimo splendore. La modernità della malinconia*, ed. Giorgio Cortenova (Venezia: Marsilio, 2007), 25.
- 47 Baldacci, *De Chirico*, 128.
- 48 De Chirico, *Scritti di Giorgio de Chirico*, 32.
- 49 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 412.
- 50 E. H. Gombrich, *Shadows: The Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western Art* (London: (National Gallery Publications, 1995), 26.
- 51 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 310; cf. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 58, 61.
- 52 Wolfgang Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology* (New York: Liveright, 1947), 224.
- 53 Herman Parret, "Synesthetic Effects: Advances in Visual Semiotics," *The Semiotic Web 1992–93*, eds. Thomas S. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 338.
- 54 Ibid., 340–341, 343; cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 225–227, 230.
- 55 Parret, "Synesthetic Effects," 340.
- 56 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 229.
- 57 On touch, cf. *ibid.*, 70–71.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 See Jean Starobinski, *La Mélancolie au miroir. Trois lectures de Baudelaire* (Paris: Julliard, 1989); Fernando Vidal, "L'Expérience mélancolique au regard de la critique", in Starobinski, *L'Encre de la mélancolie* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), 619–664; Clair, *Malinconia*; Ave Appiano, *Estetica del rottame. Consumo del mito e miti del consumo nell'arte* (Roma: Meltemi, 1999); Mario Pezzella, "La musa malinconica. Su alcune opere 'metafisiche' di Giorgio de Chirico," *Muse malinconiche*, ed. Francesco Donfrancesco (Bergamo: Moretti & Vitali, 2004), 119–138.
- 60 Vidal, "L'Expérience mélancolique au regard de la critique", 657–659.
- 61 Jean Starobinski, *L'Encre de la mélancolie* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), 490.
- 62 Cf. de Chirico, *Scritti di Giorgio de Chirico*, 29.
- 63 Cf. Parret, "Synesthetic Effects", 341.
- 64 Louis Marin, *On Representation*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 374–376.
- 65 Gillo Dorfles, *L'intervallo perduto* (Milan: Skira, 2006), 9, 24–27.
- 66 Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1999), 188–189.
- 67 Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1963), 193.
- 68 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 207.



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