

METAPOLIS. METAPHYSICS AND THE CITY*

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“A painter must not paint what he sees, but that which will be seen”.

Paul Valéry, *Mauvaises pensées*

Pier Paolo Pasolini: “The shape of the city”

Before our eyes, unexpected constellations will form. Catalogues of experiences and laboratories of images will be composed through intuition. Parallel horizons, astonishing geographies and semi-cancelled hieroglyphic palimpsests will be composed.

In the meantime, frames of *The Shape of the City* scroll by. The first frame portrays a place engulfed in an atmosphere of a colour somewhere between grey and sky-blue. This is the start of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s “political” film, broadcast on Rai in February 1974¹. It wasn’t just a simple interview or taped answers to a series of questions, but rather, a notepad in which thoughts and nostalgia flow together. A diary of notes, uniting improvised comments, frames of real life and clips of film shot in Asian countries. A “critofilm” similar to Ragghianti’s idea of using film as a means to analyze artwork. A civil pamphlet, run through with the same moral distain that can be found in *Pirate writings*.

We shall take a short journey through the Italian landscape, in order to ponder on the urban *profile*. The sites chosen are in Lazio, a region where, as Cesare Brandi recalls, one can still breathe mythology and mystery under “dense, shade-casting trees, whose shadows are warm” and “grass and turf never very green due to the hot sun they are subject to and to the night, which silently drains them”². In the distance: the mountains and the sea. There is Orte, drowned in opaque veils. Accompanied by Ninetto Davoli, Paolini frames the almost geometric perfection of the small centre, hanging closely-knit in its rocky setting, an ideal emblem of “Italy’s beauty”. It is a town placed on the edge of a desert and of volcanic erosion, an icon of poverty and sincerity. The camera lens moves on. Some strange presences are felt. The Etruscan citadel appears devastated by the virus of a corrupted modernity. To the right and left with no planning whatsoever, are plain houses that belong to another world, to other manners. Out of this, a “mixture that cracks and troubles style” is determined. The dialogue between “architectural mass” and environment, between constructed form and nature, is

* The english translation of this text has been abbreviated.

¹ See R. Chiesi in *La forma di Orte*, regarding Pasolini’s film for tv, produced by Rai, directed by Paolo Brunatto, autumn 1977. See also a P. Secilier, *P. Pasolini, La lunga strada di sabbia*, Contrasto, Rome, 2005.

² C. Brandi, *Terre d’Italia*, edited by V. Rubiu, foreword by V. Sgarbi, introduction C. Argan, Bompiani, Milan, 2006, p. 360.

altered. In another frame that doesn't deal with the defacement of the landscape, we perceive the possibility of its redemption. The curtain is raised on Sabaudia, the Pasolinian *buen retiro*. Nothing is customary. The buildings and the city-squares melt in the fragile light of the lagoon. We are in a space that has strong ideological connotations. And yet, a prodigy is achieved. A "ridiculous city" becomes stupefying, almost through enchantment. Pasolini says that Saubadia, although created by the regime, "has nothing fascist about it". Only its external characteristics bring to mind a specific political will, one that obliged architects to conceive a space according to precise aesthetic, academic and rationalist rules. Pasolini is driven by a conviction: "The regime was not able to put a chip in Italy's profound, pre-industrial rural reality". This exact kind of reality – not Fascism – is what gave raise to Sabaudia. Tracking shots of details and segments flow forth. One remains speechless. There is nothing unreal about it. Sabaudia is set on a crest, between Metaphysics and Realism. It reminds one of the scenes painted by de Chirico in his work. Although, from afar it suggests a dimension that is "human size": families live there, "complete, whole, full and humble living beings".

The Waste Land

The point resides between Metaphysics and Realism. Let us start from this *threshold*. At a fast pace, Paolini sees problems and suggests paths through intuition. He draws one into a precarious and provisional story with crevasses difficult to penetrate, with few certainties and many hypotheses, between verification and hesitancy. Uncertain events are marked by discoveries and deviations, by crossroads and brushing encounters between worlds. Codes and expressions lightly touch in a parade of metaphors and epiphanies, of analogies and metonymies. Linguistic confines collapse. It is a question of distant paths, which, through reciprocal interferences and correspondences, are extraordinarily close. There are many frozen frames in an *invisible film* with an extremely articulated plot, which holds a surprise ending for us.

The first scenes evoke the cities painted by Giorgio de Chirico, where traces of a strange destiny of urban-planning, as well as symbols of an authentic poetic obsession, like a true *maladie d'amour*, subsist. The *polis* is a recurring motive in the work of the father of Metaphysics, from his youth until his golden years, with a brief parenthesis of "inattention" coinciding with the period of the artist's return to order in which Seventeenth century Naturalism prevails; works in which horses with flowing manes and horsemen with opulent Spanish-style uniforms are seen³.

The invisible film begins in 1913 with *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day*. The urban space is composed of round, square and cylindrical towers with variously arranged floors and massive columns like smoke-stacks resembling totems of another world. Naturalistic features are almost completely absent. In a dimension beyond History, the profile of an abandoned territory is *sculpted* from colour, in which corpulent divinities, busts with no heads and the broken arms of mannequins lay. It is the start of a journey that leads to cities without time. With respect to the avant-garde interests, it seems

³ See V. Trione, *Atlanti metafisici*, on de Chirico's cities. Skira, Milan, 2005 pp. 131-208. See also P. Baldacci, *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*, translation by Jeffrey Jennings, Bulfinch, Boston, 1997.

to be an alternative region. We are far from the noisy and blinding metropolis represented by the Futurists: the modernist utopia, convulsive, impetuous, disorganized, violent and full of contrasts, pulsating with people and traffic, vivid with sounds and voices, packed with sky-scrapers and means of transportation. The silhouettes of puffing trains are the only emblems of contemporary society in these metaphysical works. Other fragments of the present are visible: robust towers without windows at the top of which flags flap in the wind: signs of contemporary world activism, features that make one delve into the mystery of the modern city. Factories with rows of columns as temples of reason: “lighthouses for the far-sighted”⁴ that play an active role in the figurative device. Only echoes. The motionless clocks in many paintings make us think there is no movement. We are not in a crazy vortex in which men and things compete with one another. There are no crowds agitated by work or play, or by an uprising. In de Chirico’s city, one breathes an inner atmosphere, one that is far from the crashing of factories and wars. The buildings are situated in an inhospitable space. The crowd – the protagonist of every Futurist action – is absent⁵.

Infused with literary suggestions by D’annunzio⁶, as well as Renaissance-style urban motifs, de Chirico’s cities have little that is real about them: they are immobile and removed from time. Within them, there is only room for mute effigies, caught in the magic of the written image. Due to the strong geometric connotations of the houses and streets, the settings appear as *sub specie aeternitatis*.

The de Chirican *urbs* is tranquil, stable and alludes to permanence. It is almost hesitant. As Sartre wrote, these settings manifest “the loquaciousness of signs in the tenacious silence of things”⁷. At first sight, it appears to be without turbulence and uneasiness. Monumental, it is immersed in light and unreality. The architecture has a noteworthy consistency. Man does not exist *per se*: he is positioned in relation to a constructed universe. Wide spaces with rectangular shaped buildings, and arches and windows in perspective form the scenes. At times, solitary towers appear that accentuate the vertical aspect of the scene and reinforce the sensation of fleeting perspectives. In the background where the countryside begins, barriers are found in front of a horizon of oppressive skies and dark seas. Like in a childhood dream, a train is often found on the other side of a wall where it releases clouds of vapor. The scenes unfold at “high noon, the hour gravid with mystery” in dark shadows cast by the sun on an incline. Precise lines, clean contours and flat surfaces seem to suggest clarity, which is immediately disturbed by bizarre objects. Nothing is, as it seems. The sunshine meets a cold northern attitude, emphasized by the fluttering of the flags.

The metaphysical piazza dwells in astonished climates inhabited only by silhouettes, which deprived of their identity, are transformed into disquieting muse. The city is transported into an acid and bare imaginary territory infused with a humanistic *pieta* with regard to metropolitan anonymity, an accepted and inevitable condition of modernity. It is virtual cancellation of the individual from the context that surrounds it: being *without a name* is a privileged position for the isolation of consciousness,

⁴ P. Fossati, *Storie di figure e di immagini*, Einaudi, Turin, 1995, p. 83.

⁵ See C. de Seta, *La cultura architettonica in Italia tra le due guerre*, on the differences between the Futurist city and the metaphysical city, Electa, Naples, 1998, (5th edition) pp. 70-75.

⁶ M. Calvesi, *La Metafisica schiarita*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1982, pp. 79-82.

⁷ J.-P. Sartre, *Essays in Aesthetics*, Washington Square Press, New York, 1963, p. 129.

with participant disenchantment, in a mute scenography made of porticos and walls, of streets and buildings. Only buildings and monuments remain. The inhabitants have left, almost like “the day after”. In their fleet, they have left scarce remnants. At this point the only deliverance is through instruments, models and simulacrum. At times, miniature figures appear lost in the distance.

An analogous abandonment was commendably evoked in an aphorism of *The Gay Science*, which comprises “the apex of Nietzsche’s philosophy on architecture”⁸ in which one reads: “One day, and probably soon, we will need to recognize what is missing primarily in our big cities: quiet, wide, expansive places for reflection, places with long, high-ceilinged arcades for bad or all too sunny weather, where the cries of merchants or the noise from carriages can not penetrate and where refined manners would prohibit even priests from praying aloud: a complex of buildings and sites that would give expression to the sublimity of contemplation and of strolling alone”⁹. Nietzsche speaks of empty and serene places without an immediate purpose, which are destined as spaces of contemplation and to *strolling alone*, free from the noise of traffic and the clamor of the crowd, protected by linear buildings.

The profile of de Chirico’s metaphysical city derives from these lines: an urban refuge, impenetrable by the noise of modernity, a place without crowds. It is a space in which the chaotic vertigo of the present comes to a stop. Nietzsche wrote, “becoming silent before beauty is an intense waiting” and “But the feeling of calm, wellbeing and the liberation from tension that is in beauty? Evidently what occurs is the perfectly uniform flowing of our strength: we adapt, one could say, to the high columns we walk among”¹⁰. These are the characteristics of a human environment governed by “greatness, calm and sunshine, qualities in which all earthly things transform”¹¹.

De Chirico turns the pages of *The Gay Science* in order to paint scenes of splendor and ruins¹². There are no momentary illuminations. The architecture is not bathed in sudden rays; they have no day, nor night. They live in sunset. The air does not soften the corners, but accentuates them. The colour of the atmosphere is that of travertine or thousand-year granite, the shadows of which infuse a mysterious graveness.

The suspended cities bring to mind a distant Iliad in the buildings and porticos, arches and terraces. An ancient universe marked with volumes that aspire to elementariness, to which the Italian culture of the early twentieth century seems to be resistant. The various floors do not intersect one another. That which is striking in metaphysical worlds is the immobility, the solitude and the sharp, varnished contours, which mark the body of the buildings with accuracy. It is precisely this aspect of solidity that gives this art – an art that is revealed through Mnemosyne – an absolute and eternal value¹³.

Inhabited with strange domestic objects that are “embarrassing proof of an unjustifiable inheritance”¹⁴,

⁸ Cfr. F. Neumeyer, *Nietzsche and Modern Architecture*, in A. Kostka-I. Wohlfarth (edited by), *Nietzsche and “An Architecture of Our Minds”*, Issues & Debates, Los Angeles, 1999, pp. 285-309.

⁹ F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), Random House, New York, 1974.

¹⁰ F. Nietzsche, *Frammenti postumi*. 1882-1884, vol. VII, t. I, , edited by G. Colli e M. Montinari, Adelphi, Milan, 1982, p. 288.

¹¹ F. Nietzsche, *Human too Human*, The Macmillan Co. New York, 1911.

¹² P. Baldacci, *The Function of Nietzsche’s Thought in de Chirico’s Art*, in *Nietzsche and “An Architecture of Our Minds”*, cit. pp. 91-113. See also F. J. Bauer, *De Chirico urbanista. Lo spazio e il vuoto nell’ideare la città fra le due guerre* in «Storica», IX, 25-26, 2003, pp. 43-69.

¹³ P. Baldacci, *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*, cit., p. 293.

¹⁴ A. Branzi, *Introduzione al design italiano*, Baldini & Castoldi, Milan, 1999, p. 79.

the *Italian Piazzas* revolve around an *absence*. The *Piazzas* are theaters of the absurd for battles amid Argonauts that have never existed. Placed in an intermediate region, between light and darkness, they dwell between the depth of the sky and the surface of the earth. They are abandoned in the emptiness that fluctuates inbetween the earth's fragments, in a flashing aura that charges the buildings with obscure meaning. The factories and the chimneys are turned off. The world is a mere scenic background on which identities, trapped in the rigid shape of statues, mannequins, and bowling pins, pass by. Our intuition grasps, through almost unperceivable warnings, an improvised censoring. Shadows continue to be cast. The melancholy of a beautiful afternoon makes the atmosphere slow and heavy. We get a glimpse of territories that exist beyond the noise of history, territories that transmit a feeling of confusion, unease and isolation. It is a disbandment of real and imaginary Epiphanies. A striking waste yard, majestically discontinuous, dwells in the remains and wreckage: like a cathedral of clandestine memories and a pastoral landscape of ruins. We cross atlases that could be described with Thomas S. Eliot's verses. In *The Waste land*, he spoke of an "unreal city, under the brown fog of a winter dawn"¹⁵.

Analogous Geographies

In order to paint his unreal city de Chirico isolates a few fragments and attributes a fundamental role to the framing of the scene. To make the entirety of the elements visible, he bases his action on a photographic matrix: the isolation required to take the shot and the exposure. From an enclosed space, he leads us to the vastness of the world within a picture frame like that of a window¹⁶. With this method of shooting, de Chirico makes empty images: not of solitary locations, but ones deprived of animation. The city appears to be deserted like an apartment for which new tenants have not yet been found.

Behind the *tragedy of uncertain significance*, there is always a comparison with reality to be had¹⁷. The seduction is born from the dialogue with the city – Munich, Rome, Florence, Turin, Paris, and Ferrara. Nevertheless, de Chirico never makes a faithful portrayal of *truth* in his works. He has the eye of a traveler, who is surprised by the new countries he encounters. He places his finds in an archive of the present. Different from the architect – for whom spaces are precise and definite –, in his *painted writings* he conceives places like actors, modifying them, moving them. He uses "his" cities like a visual pretense, with which he does not entertain an abstract fidelity. He makes undeserved appropriations, lingering particularly on everydayness, on urban views. He starts with what exists in a city. The metaphysical works – at least those painted before 1919 – are often born of unforeseen moments. De Chirico likes to keep a notepad with him when he is out. He makes rough, almost childlike sketches on pieces of paper, the majority of which that are now lost. He picks up

¹⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Desolate Earth - Four Quartets* (1922).

¹⁶ C. Marra: *Metafisica dello sguardo fotografico*, in R. Barilli e F. Solmi (edited by) *La Metafisica: gli anni venti*, vol. II, Bologna, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, 1980, pp. 663-665, as well as, *Fotografia e pittura nel Novecento*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 1999, pp. 73-89.

¹⁷ P. Baldacci, *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*, cit., and F. Benzi, *Eccentricità*, Electa, Milan, 2004, pp. 87-112.

on Neoclassic and Romantic urban motives of a German origin. At first, he focuses on motives that seem to adapt well to his “need to meditate on formal aspects”¹⁸. He does not grasp the architecture as a whole. He develops lines that he abandons and takes up again, unrelentingly, lines with which he composes inextricable labyrinths.

We shall take a journey in order to reveal the forms of an *interior architecture*. De Chirico submits the world to a process of elimination of the superfluous and shows its anatomy by means of a system of meanings. He doesn't look at nature, nor does he describe it. He delves into the depths of the soul in order to make the forms of the infinite apparent. He sets up abandoned scenes that allow the spectator to project their feelings into the paintings. On the “stage” of the painting he sets objects, which through free association catalyze vision by means of innovative perceptive actions and unforeseen states of consciousness¹⁹. De Chirico elaborates an *analogous city*, founded on realistic presences. He gathers each item and relocates it in the *agora*, dissolving in the background the quarters in which day to day life proceeds. His *spaces* appear both compact and eclectic. They are non-spaces: they do not exist, even if specific models can be identified in the individual constructions. One gets a faint idea that his *Piazzas* derive from a precise visual memory, albeit arranged in enigmatic strategies. By means of a complex system of parallelisms, de Chirico reveals unexpected worlds. In a single topos, he brings together environments that are distant from each other. He builds a fantastic city on the foundations of a real one. His painted architectures are covered by myths and legends, like an empire in one of Borges's parabolas, wrapped up in maps drawn by cartographers...

De Chirico holds a siege on reality in order to widen the scope of action of the imaginary. His compass is set on desire, with the strict arithmetic of a request for compensation. He makes invented elements and real facts play out on a chess board, where he positions them in a dimension that is brushed by alternating and disaccording aspects, which are far from history's necessities. For him, the most intense freedom is always born from confronting himself with the world, through a filter of transpositions. Sections of cities are presented. De Chirico focuses on *plastic qualities* and abandons all kind of explicit description. He submits his “materials” to a transformation within a parody, which breaks and twists them. He makes use of profanation in order to achieve the disenchantment of an object and afford it a purpose different from the estranged and petrified position it occupies within a sacred context²⁰. He neutralizes each and every starting point. He treats architecture as bits and pieces to use as he pleases, taking away from it the aura of the period in which it was built. In his *assemblages*, Munich, Florence, Turin, Paris and Ferrara are recognizable only as echoes and imprints. Places of transit and dispersion, inscribed in dynamic never-before-seen perceptions. On the surface, urban scenes are defined – actual *portraits* of cities –, in which an eccentric documentation of real situations, with views of piazzas and buildings, which, violated by cruel idealization, determine the difference between the truth of things and the truth of art. This occurs by means of an inspired mechanism wherein landscape is adapted in a theatrical way, which provides a strong atmosphere of sus-

¹⁸ P. Baldacci, *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*.

¹⁹ H. Belting, *Square Hermetic Visions*, in E. Coen (edited by), *Metaphysica*, Electa, Milan, 2003, pp. 18-32.

²⁰ G. Agamben, *Profanazioni*, Nottetempo, Rome, 2005; in particular *l'Elogio della profanazione*, pp. 83-106.

pension. It seems that the situations elaborated by de Chirico are ones in which nothing moves – all movement is frozen –. In reality, he does not create an image of order, nor one of immobility. He does not consider space as an unchangeable structure, nor as closed form, rather, he conceives it as a process in constant transformation, in a rhythm marked by differences between levels, by breaches in proportion, by deviations of outlines and by corners that give form to curvatures. He designs imperfect architecture in which – in tune with the spirit of Antonio Filarete²¹ – the centre of the representation is always *moved*. He presents visions that seem to be “broken-through”. To the frontal plane of the image he applies the same rules as the cartographer does while making a map. He sees the painting as geography: a surface upon which the volume’s height is reduced to a series of forms. The principals of rationality are broken in a patchwork in which various episodes are superimposed and assembled out of order. By reaching beyond literary or philosophic interests, de Chirico makes the different levels of comprehension slide and merge. All “true” suggestion is overwhelmed within these impenetrable representations. New regions open themselves within known confines. That which is familiar, becomes perturbing. In a game between closeness and remoteness, we acquire an “elsewhere” that causes disconcert. Composed by innumerable pieces of reality, the *impossible cities* seem to be lacking in something. They are administered by mechanisms that don’t work perfectly, mechanism that proceed by cuttings and censorships.

Like a chess player, de Chirico is fascinated by that which is without a centre, that which is lengthened and flattened. He takes one into a turbulent urban universe with re-invented buildings united through crazy relationships and wrapped in a labyrinth of symbolic figures, which dilate and fold incessantly. It is a world of heterogeneous objects. While maintaining an evident monumentality, these objects come together and evoke a *calm chaos*, an event very different from the one the Futurists painted. A video clip of the soul in which each object is frozen in a precarious immobility, in a momentary halting and in an endless delirium. A city of the absurd, which brings Blaise Cendrars’s *utopialand* to mind²².

Prophecies

One is perplexed in front of a *utopia land*. Where are we? Are we in an open piazza surrounded by buildings that hide all external contexts, a place without presences and atmosphere? Or are we inside a soundproof box, closed in by building props with boards leaning toward the spectator? We cross a temporal dimension that is discontinuous and playfully contradictory, which goes back and forth, continuously returning on itself in order to suspend all order between the various pieces, like things washed up on the shore, sealed in an apparent death. A *weaving* in which no wound is healed.

De Chirico throws caution to the wind with regard to the historical timeline. He draws formal classical rigor upon the “openings” of the contemporary, mixing the present with memory and imagina-

²¹ In describing “Sforzinda”, Filarete spoke of the piazza as an impressive place rich with views and perspectives capable of facilitating encounters, unexpected meetings, letting chance and the bizarre have their way. See A. Averlino, known as Filarete, *Trattato di Architettura* (1464).

²² B. Cendrars, *Trop c’est trop* (1955), in *Oeuvres*, vol. XI, Denoël, Paris, 2005, pp. 303-332.

tion in mind-boggling synchronicity. He decomposes vision in cascades of impressions. He makes distant eras converge. He unites technical know-how with disaccording construction, fusing, as Nietzsche would “the necessity of play and chance, the tension of opposites and harmony”²³. He paints a “hyper city”²⁴ marked by tension and superimposition that has no clear-cut or imperative structure. Anticipating Dalí’s “delirious” theories, de Chirico invents an *architecture of paranoia*. Using poetic motives that bring Lautréamont to mind, he unabashedly recycles motives and figures to give a new start to things. The artist superimposes forms from the world as if they were playing cards whose original sequence no longer proves satisfactory. He acts like one who cheats at the end of an impossible game by painting impossible perspectives, and landscapes in which a hurricane seems to have passed through. We are dealing here with a vertical territory, balanced between the memory of Ancient Greece and the Renaissance and a pre-configuration of the future. Perspectives are overturned. The *Italian Piazza* is a unique cross between the archaic and modernity, in which a silent museum buried under melancholy and torment anticipates “the phantom of present day American urbanism with its alienating suburbia and depressing empty spaces” where an apathy for the present and the foresight of discomfort, which are impossible to define by time or by presence, exist²⁵.

A prophesy is defined that speaks of the destiny of the contemporary metropolis, a prophesy that positions itself beyond all attempts to try and impose order and symmetry. The organization planned by the draftsman is overstepped. The beauty of today’s metropolis is not preordained, nor is it the result of a program. It is unintentional and has something spontaneous and unfinished about it. It is extravagant, beyond any precise calculation, like a cave full of stalagmites, formed over time. Insignificant buildings standing haphazardly side-by-side evoke a magical atmosphere. It is a beauty achieved almost *by mistake*, which is nevertheless rich and intense²⁶.

The postmodern city does not define a pacified, continuous world. It often appears to be without a precise plan like a puzzle composed of objects based on simple geometries and multiple projections in a layout of buildings of different heights. It is a river that runs and thickens, de-structuralizes and divides into compartments. It is an undulated, wrinkly constellation, cut by edges and full of topoi that act as containers and set the limits of mobile geometries. The spreading of the metropolis is always balanced by the gravity born of constructed forms. This dilatation is continually obstructed by closed, permanent spaces and by invasive, static barriers. Great silos offer resistance against the unfolding of the urban environment by absorbing and consuming energy and in doing so prevent all drifting. “We live obsessed by images and legends of speed and ubiquity while the spaces we build stubbornly insist on providing definitions”. A reality is determined that fosters emergency, governed by an order capable of heresy²⁷.

As a prelude to such scenes, de Chirico composes a force field in which every element acts as an

²³ F. Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (1873), Henry Regnery Publishing, Chicago, 1969.

²⁴ A. Corboz elaborated on the idea of the “hyper city” in an essay in 1994. See A. Corboz *Ordine sparso*, edited by F. Masini, Newton Compton, Rome, 1980.

²⁵ A.H. Merjian, *Sopravvivenze delle architetture di Giorgio de Chirico*, in G. Celant (edited by), *Arti & Architettura*, vol. I, Skira, Milan, 2004, p. 37.

²⁶ M. Kundera speaks of the “unintentional” beauty of New York. See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Perennial Library, New York, 1985.

²⁷ M. Cacciari, *Nomadi in prigione*, in “Casabella”, LXVI, novembre 2002, p. 7. Regarding this theme see P. Mello, *Metamorfosi dello spazio*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2002; and Z. Bauman, *Fiducia e paura nella città* (2005), introduction by M. Magatti, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 2005.

irradiation centre of the “city sense”. Systems put together by skilled, almost cinematic editing in which discreet autonomous blocks placed side by side compose a dissonant score. A visionary result, rooted in the reason of *his* world. As Yves Bonnefoy noted, de Chirico sets up theatres that suggest other dimensions. The shadows that run through his compositions indicate an unreality. And yet, it is only *trompe l’oeil*. The universe evoked in metaphysical painting belongs *implicitly* to the Italian landscape. It dwells not only in the imagination’s rooms, nor merely in the ravines of the impossible, but exists “everywhere and in everything on this earth [...], joined, centered and made real and inhabitable by an act of the spirit”²⁸.

Conquered Lands

No hesitation is allowed. The architecture’s solemnity is perforated by a *contagious* gesture, capable of giving *new life* to each of the elements employed. As Jean Cocteau said, it is the gesture of a non-landscape artist, capable of showing “the unreal of reality”, of taking away the veils of habit and make objects fall from the sky²⁹. A place of difference, a seat of transformation that disintegrates all sense of security and violates all stability, de Chirico’s city offers itself like a diffused expanse with no centre. It is an unfinished puzzle, a screen on which different layers and planes interweave, bringing to mind subtle analogies with the skyline of New York³⁰.

We are in an upside down world, swept through with surprises and *coups-de-théâtre*. The spectator plays the role of a wayfarer who arrives in a place he’s never been and is disoriented. Urban space is transformed in a tangled mass of knots difficult to loosen. Heretic gestures, such as false leads and tracks leading nowhere, cause models to fall apart. It is a labyrinth of icons and meaning in which one gets lost, with no hope of escape. “The uneasiness of a dance in which we wear a mask and find ourselves set before unmasked friends, who look upon us as if upon strangers, and speak a new language”³¹, as Cocteau observed. In this *dance* a crime is committed. Nothing is explained. We have a sense of incomprehensible forces. The mortal and criminal rupture that is celebrated is illuminating and productive. The scene is constellated with clues left on the floor. Robberies, assassins... All homogeneity is disintegrated; de Chirico’s cities are disseminated with schizophrenic presences. They look like tables that haven’t been cleared, almost like prophesy of the science fiction scenery described in the books of Philip K. Dick.

Removed from the totality of all historical and cultural contexts, debris deposits itself on the surface. They are pieces that indicate the end of a world, whilst acting as traces of that world. They display a mutilated grandeur, in a subtle game between death and rebirth. They are tangible proof of a universe that is no more and is destined to a rhythmic resetting. They show the intersection of the invisible with the visible, express duration and eternity, and tend towards a memory now gone, although

²⁸ Y. Bonnefoy, *L’entroterra* (1971), edited by G. Caramore, Donzelli, Rome, 2004, pp. 50-51.

²⁹ J. Cocteau, *Le mystère Laïc* (1928), Editions Des Quatre Chemins, Paris, 1928.

³⁰ Regarding de Chirico’s relationship with America, see *Giorgio de Chirico and America*, edited by E. Braun, Allemandi, Turin - New York, 1996; and V. Trione, *Atlante metafisici*, pp. 183-194.

³¹ J. Cocteau, *Le mystère Laïc*, cit.

still alive in the dawn and in a reawakening³². Initially, these shreds are isolated, in order for them to be subsequently put together in unusual syntheses. Remains of an uncontaminated and pure era, ruins mark the mixing of nature and culture, which “loses itself in the past to remerge in the present like a sign with no meaning”. They don’t raise only the question of a problematic relationship with history, but we find palpitating echoes within them that project beyond the sudden and fragile dynamics of current events. They represent the “apex of Art, in which the multitude of pasts to which it refers in an incomplete way cause the enigma to increase two-fold, and in doing so, exasperate its beauty”³³. In front of us, we have something which, thanks to Ernst Junger, we can define as “conquered lands”. This is what is left after a bomb explodes: visions of a modern day apocalypse. The cartography of a catastrophe inhabited by a vast archive of lost figures and abandoned material. An archeologist who is sensitive to the poetic question of the avant-garde, de Chirico gathers pieces, with extra care with regard to the fractures and scraps, to cuttings and dispersions³⁴.

Arches, Porticoes and Piazzas

Contrasting visions: at first glance the metaphysical cities seem to be composed of urban still-lives. They show a naturalness from which the warmth of life and the tenderness of the soul have been removed due to a sin having been committed. They evoke an immobility, which is continually brought to question as it is run through by an uneasiness that compromises the total balance of the image. Each part is a solitary comet, subtracted from a precise constellation of meaning. The various episodes are pieces put together in an *organized craziness*, floating in a no-man’s land. They reside in the mysterious regions of a linguistic horizon in which they are not placed in relationship with easily decipherable icons. They do not express anything, nor do they communicate, they simply *happen*. Their organization is one of signs, the origin and value of which are obscured. This moment of *transparent communication* is only the start: the style goes beyond the demands of an unambiguous and clear reading. Moved by an inertial force, the linguistic act consumes the “luminous area” of clear meaning, in favour of “opaque spaces”. We cross through uninhabited peninsulas, governed by the few figures of which the metaphysical primer is composed. Firstly, the portico as a formal model is a prime element that brings to mind images from the sketches made by Evaristo de Chirico – the father of the *Pictor Optimus* – for the construction of the railway in Tessaglia³⁵.

Following a Nietzschean line of thought, de Chirico states that painters must learn to examine the world in order to grasp the fascination that lays within the “intensity of lines and angles”. What joy and pain are hidden in the arch, in the corner of a street, in the edges of a table...? “For us, these signs constitute a kind of moral and esthetic code of representation which, with our capacity for

³² S. Settis, *Futuro del classico*, Einaudi, Turin, 2004 and M. Belpoliti, in Crolli, Einaudi, Turin, 2005.

³³ M. Augé, *Rovine e macerie*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2004.

³⁴ V. Trione, “Chroma” in *Atlanti metafisici*, pp.209-359.

³⁵ Regarding the influence of the buildings planned by Evaristo de Chirico on the *Pictor Optimus*’ imagination, see *Tessalikoi Sidirodroni*, s.e., Volos, 1995; and P. Baldacci, *Giorgio De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*.

clairvoyance, we construct a new metaphysical psychology of things in painting”³⁶, de Chirico writes, recalling the geometric metaphysics by Otto Weininger in *On Last Things*, in which he underlined the negative value of circular movement. Far from being an icon of perfection and symmetry, the circle has “tremendous condemnation” to it; closed upon itself, it is the image of a lack of imagination, of immobility, of “aureole shaped movement” and of an eternal return to the *same*. It enchains one, detracts liberty and isolates. Whereas open and unfinished form, is excruciatingly beautiful. The archway, ellipse and curve do not represent – as does the circle – a “complete, unassailable fullness”; they indicate the “irreversibility of life and of time”³⁷. In reference to Weininger’s thought, de Chirico explains: “This thought made clear to me the eminent metaphysical impression I had always found in porticos and arched openings”³⁸.

This is a rather unusual choice. As a motif, the arch is not part of the avant-garde’s iconographic repertoire at the beginning of the 20th century. Cubism, Suprematism and Constructivism art movements, as well as De Stijl, refused and condemned circular form. These are all movements contemporary to the birth of the Modern Movement in architecture. As a motif, the arch recalls a model of something irrational, of forms that are irreducible within the rational world of the line and sharp angles. They bring us back to an era of classicism that is irreparably lost. The avant-garde prefers the cube and the parallelogram to the curve: neat and clear geometry as expressions of a rationality inspired by the machine universe, characteristics far from any nuance of subjectiveness.

De Chirico and the protagonists of the avant-garde share the desire to bring an essential and clean art into being, based on a quest for an unadorned plasticity achieved through revolutionary language. At the same time, he brings to life a primal past, which is grasped in its uncontaminated purity.

The strong arch is not a stylistic element recuperated from precise historical eras. Moreover, it presents itself as an ancestral, archetypical motif. In this regard, de Chirico, in many of his works, seems to follow a different course with respect to the course followed by his point of reference – Böcklin –, who was the inventor of small temples, of porticos and austere buildings in which historical style is put together with unabashed and eclectic taste. Instead, de Chirico reduces the forms he takes from the memories of his youthful period in Munich in a different way than his “master”³⁹. As “primary structures” the arch, which has a fabulous aura and holds mysterious connotations, is an image from an ideal museum, from which “a minimal ‘quantum’ is safeguarded with the same regard as rectangular forms”⁴⁰. Analogous to the arches, even the porticoes have a profound poetic power.

³⁶ G. de Chirico, *Estetica metafisica*, in “Valori Plastici”, I, 4-5, April-May 1919, in G. de Chirico-I. Far, *Commedia dell’arte moderna*, edited by J. de Sanna, Milan, Abscondita, 2002, p. 32.

³⁷ O. Weininger, *On Last Things* (1903); P. Baldacci, *Giorgio De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*. P. Italia, *Il pellegrino appassionato*, Sellerio, Palermo, 2004, p. 281; V. Trione, *Atlanti metafisici*, cit., pp. 287-290.

³⁸ G. de Chirico, *Estetica metafisica*, cit. in G. de Chirico-I. Far, *Commedia dell’arte moderna*, cit., p. 32.

³⁹ Indeed, one could suppose that the birth of Metaphysical painting be attributed to Munich. “Even if its inception occurs months after [...] de Chirico’s departure from Munich for Florence, its conception could be attributed to the Bavarian capital”. It is along this reasoning that Schmied, with a certain flare for irony, sustained that the *Italian Piazza*’s could indeed be called the Munich Piazza’s. W. Schmied, *De Chirico, pittura metafisica e avanguardia internazionale: dodici tesi*, in *Arte italiana del XX secolo*, Leonardo, Milan, 1989, pp. 72-73.

⁴⁰ R. Barilli, *Giorgio de Chirico e l’architettura*, 699, November 1988, p. 78. In de Chirico’s “geometric philosophy” it is possible to find traces of the words of Leon Battista Alberti, for whom the arch was “the point in which a road opens onto a piazza or forum; especially if it is the ‘royal’ road”; L. B. Alberti, *L’architettura* [1443-45].

They are doors that are always open. They facilitate the gathering of thought and transform the sensation of landscape in an “image that acts in accordance with meditation and memory”. The arch blocks the sky by framing it, thus giving it a perfect shape. By framing specific viewpoints onto nature, the vision of the environment is intensified. Porticoes evoke a time when one *reasoned by walking*. They delimit ideal spaces in which one can converse and ponder. They hide something that is unfinished, imperfect, causing a yearning for the “other”⁴¹. Valéry’s verses speak of the arch as being held up by “sweet columns / whose hats are garnished with real birds / that walk on the edges”: like lilies, they animate an “orchestra of purring” sacrificed to the “silence of unison” capable of elevating “candid hymns” that *carry the sky*, that place the sun and moon before one another under “a God the colour of honey”⁴².

It is on these minimal compositional elements that de Chirico’s language is based. It is a style that functions as a prelude to the monumentalism of the 1920s. It is a transverse artistic current that runs through the 20th Century where it defines unpublished linguistic fields in order to “bring out disparate and opposite episodes”⁴³. In this season of *new Classicism*’s, many artists, from Picasso to Beckman, Sironi to Permeke, Rivera to Orozco, El Lisitskij to Matisse, Léger to Campigli and Schrimpf to Epstein, compose a clear reconstruction of form, through the use of a figurative sense that manifests itself with emphasis in a simple and vigorous expressiveness made of compact volumes.

Anticipating this tendency, de Chirico closes arches and porticos in the simple frame of the piazza in which they present themselves as extraordinary *places of sight*. They are the climax of a woven and knotted form, in which each specific context is composed of a system of open spaces framed by buildings, in a game between full and empty spaces. Spaces in which roads flow together and settings intersect; the piazza is both a collector and a generator: “it collects energy from the streets that converge upon it and at the same time distributes it upon the streets that branch away from it”⁴⁴. In the Italian piazza dwells the memory of eras long past, which conveys a sense of prophesy. Something in their state of destabilizing abandonment reminds one of the *ruins* and *caprice* of 18th and 19th century painting, yet “in their smooth surfaces, dry lines and bare walls, the severity of an anachronistic abstract modernity is announced”. Effortlessly, they exhibit an unfulfilled narrative: they bring incongruous icons and incompatible spatial dimensions into conciliation and sublimate Myth into matter, poetry into prose. And a “transcendental spirituality of abstractionism is found in the solid, concrete presence of the architecture and the figure”. They gather the past in “the same spatial and visual folds of the splicing action employed by modernism”. They put into relation compact geometrical form and rarified lyric form, as well as intrinsic Italian sensitivity and “cosmopoli-

⁴¹ P. Fossati, *Storie di figure e di immagini*, cit., pp. 78-79.

⁴² P. Valéry, *Charmes* (1922), in *Oeuvres*, edited by J. Hytier, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, pp. 116-118. Bigongiari hypothesized that de Chirico’s painted architecture influenced Valéry’s verses in *Cantiques des colonnes*: “Should we really forget that Valéry was among those who frequented the *Bureau de recherches surréalistes* at 15 rue de Grenelle - a fact sustained by Breton himself -? Valéry, like a kind of Gustave Moreau who knew he had to “work for posterity”, the hypothesis is tempting. Are the ‘hymnes candides’ of the Valéry’s ‘columns’ really so distant from de Chirico’s inspiration?” See P. Bigongiari, *Poesia francese del Novecento*, Vallecchi, Florence, 1968, p. 285.

⁴³ F. Benzi, *Permeke e il monumentalismo novecentesco*, in R. Chiappini (edited by), *Constant Permeke*, Milan, Skira, 1996, p. 60. On 20th century monumentalism see M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, *Classicismo pittorico*, Costa & Nolan, Genoa, 1991 and V. Trione, *Vite parallele*, in V. Trione (edited by) *I luogbi e l’anima*, Federico Motta, Milan, 2005, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁴ G. De Carlo, *Nelle città del mondo* (1995), Marsilio, Venice, 2002 (2 ed.), p. 26.

tan innovation". They unite Myth and Modernity in the same song, oscillating between nostalgia and oblivion, personal memory and liberating deconstructionism. "In contrast to the superficial *passéisme* and the aura of classicism that characterize his paintings, de Chirico's temporal ethos is substantially no less "futuristic" than any of Marinetti's proclamations"⁴⁵.

The backgrounds of the metaphysical paintings are source and possibility, shell and protection. They are the "other world that hosts and makes possible" the dream of the image. They allude to territories without precise connotations. Within these slippery confines live contrasts in an iconography based on the ornament and figuration of signs and geometries. A kind of metatemporal totality emerges in this *circular space*. An intense inherent *desire* is perceived. Dissimilar from that which occurs in the paintings of Bruegel, Canaletto or Carpaccio, de Chirico's *agora* is not a container of happenings or anecdotes. It doesn't present events, nor is it chronometric form in which time compresses current events and stories. It is not a mirror upon which the eye moves through sound and noise from one episode to the next. Even the statues are incorporated into the background, where they take on "the function of the figure"⁴⁶. They are metonymies of figures and oneiric citations.

Shadow Writing

As open as it may appear, the piazza seems circumscribed by barriers and buildings, which are full, unmoving, inhospitable and worn out. The piazza is empty. Space condenses in one unique point, where it has body and is occupied. No element can penetrate its dense volume. The impact of the figuration is lessened by presences that are continuously colliding, as they run up and down horizontal and vertical axes, amid pauses and slight misses. Not even light can touch upon the context: "all that manages to get through is a residue of light, a dark, anoxic hematoma, a venous dawn filtered by capillaries"⁴⁷.

De Chirico is seduced by these *relics* and is fascinated by the mystery held within the shadows, the aspects of which are always extraordinarily evasive and unpredictable. The shadows are presences that belong to a real environment and are, at the same time ephemeral and changing and disappear from sight. They are reflections of a stable world while maintaining their autonomy. They are not a part of "things"; they can not be touched. They certify the solidity of an object in so much as that which they project is necessarily true. Spellbound, they constitute the secret side of architecture. Although intact and recognizable, they are difficult to decipher. They indicate an *elsewhere*; they bring the eternal structure of things to mind, as well as the secret side of phenomena and enigmatic dimensions. They are emblems of the "un-finished" that harbours within itself the soul of form.

Going beyond traditional "shadow-mania", de Chirico takes advantage of reflections and its effects. He transgresses the constraints of the "cast shadow" and attributes autonomy to refracted light in order to accentuate an atmosphere of mystery and enhance "a feeling of disquiet", as Gombrich

⁴⁵ A.H. Merjian, *Sopravvivenze delle architetture di Giorgio de Chirico*, cit., p. 32.

⁴⁶ T. Scarpa, *The Song in Dream* (edited by) E. Coen, *Metaphysica* pp. 78-79.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

noted⁴⁸. De Chirico distances himself from the line of Contemporary Art that privileges visual perception and the investigation of spatial-temporal factors. He draws still and independent shadows that often trace an irrational path and have a life far-removed from the objects they refer to, far from any hint of mere decoration. His shadows establish themselves as *ontological* entities, capable of bringing urban form out of the shell of indistinctiveness. They name and exalt parts of the city by framing them in magic intelligence. De Chirico's *Italian Piazzas* are seen abandoned on the imperceptible threshold of day and night, in the thinning autumn fog at that time of day when the plain seems about to say something but never does, repeating itself infinitely.

Mystery and Melancholy of a Street (1914) is a work in which de Chirico paints an urban scene. In the forefront there is a moving van similar to those found in Paris. The classical perspective set-up of archways on the left, analogous to those in *The Anguishing Morning* (1912), exalts the scene's composure. All is stable. The scene's uniqueness is produced by the outline of a warrior with a spear in the background (most probably a statue). On the left a girl runs along playing with a hoop, as homage to the female figures in Gordon Craig's stage settings. It seems to be a game of displacement that could be described with Valentino Zeichen's verses from *Pagine di Gloria*: "We, on the Metaphysic team / occupy strategic positions / on the field, styles from antiquity / assisting in the defence of the past. / Despite the fact that the limits / of the stakes are unknown to us / we are alert in order to take the circle unawares / that is driven by the girl; / that comes out onto the piazza / from a foreseen side street / ungraspable shadow, driven / by the small magic wand / which holds time in balance"⁴⁹.

Rise and Fall: from Painting to Architecture

Archways and porticoes, piazzas and shadows have the value of letters that refer to significant "moments" of 20th century architecture. They are reinvented figures, mixed up on an abacus and marked by different nuances. Through a crystal prism, syllables pass and recombine themselves in concepts that are often contradictory. Specific iconographic motifs survive and are absorbed, more or less faithfully by planners from various generations. These project planners take up on a specific *manière de voir*, based on suspended atmospheres, sophisticated games of perspective, melancholic forward-reaching shadows that have no origin, just like photographic "back-lighting"⁵⁰.

In our *invisible film*, a heterodox and unexpected story is set down, made of hints and references, of confirmed origins and shown negations. There are passages to be investigated as well as a labyrinth of ghosts and enticements worthy of being revealed. It is an adventure in which confusion and abandonment are a part, as well as an adventure that spans two centuries, by way of institutions and codes. The images are picture frames that lead from painting to architecture in an intense com-

⁴⁸ E. Gombrich, *Shadows. The Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western Art*, National Gallery Publications, London, 1995. See also V. I. Stoichita, *Breve storia dell'ombra* (1999), Il Saggiatore, Milan, 2003 (2^e ed.).

⁴⁹ V. Zeichen, *Pagine di gloria* (1983), in *Poesie. 1963-2003*, introduction by G. Ferroni, Mondadori, Milan, 2004, p. 142.

⁵⁰ G. Braghieri, *Torre, lattina di Coca-Cola e Gauloises. Il rapporto tra arte e architettura in Aldo Rossi*, in G. Celant (edited by), *Arti & Architettura*, vol. II, cit., p. 452.

parison between: he who invents the world on the canvas, and he who relates to that same world on earth. Here is de Chirico, an inventor of solemn although hallucinatory, cities, places that are still, but also unstable. Expanses of space collocated in timeless suspension with pauses and dissonance. It is an *imagerie* that is typical of the Italian landscape, the modernity of which is continuously interrupted with “fragments and lacerations of incomprehensible ancient history”⁵¹. A kind of painted writing that has the enigmatic clarity of hieroglyphics. Without a specific origin, the images are always in flight, in a fertile diaspora of meaning.

Contradictory to Futurism, De Stijl, Bauhaus and Esprit Nouveau, de Chirico does not maintain a direct dialogue with architects. He does not believe that the modification of the built environment can constitute an improvement on individual condition, because “humanity is, and will be, that which it always has been”⁵².

His itinerary takes place strictly within the confines of the work of art, which are understood as inviolable confines. They are confines that unite, a meeting place, not a place of conflict. These confines separate the space in which we live and the *alter mundus*, the language and costumes of which we are unfamiliar. It is a line before our eyes, a ridge in which one *point* touches another *point*, which exposes us to the unknown. It is a wound that connects the known and the unknown. It is a parenthesis that makes a painting sacred. The frame alludes to immobility, which seems *tuned* to the dynamism of the painted motifs, adding to the image and counterbalancing it. It speaks of closeness and distance and is simultaneously on this side, as well as on the other side of a frontier. It is a membrane between inside and outside and a territory in which a dense dramaturgy of points and lines is articulated on the surface⁵³. In the course of his long itinerary, de Chirico has always deeply respected these limits. He may never have imagined that one day his painted cities could become an extraordinary pretext, be embodied and “built”.

We observe a dramatic turn of events that can be explained by referring to a page of *Ecce homo*, in which Nietzsche affirms that he feels both *decadence* and *commencement*. “It is only this, if anything, that can explain the neutrality, the liberty from any side-taking with regard to the complex problem of life, perhaps found in my thought. No-one has ever had a more refined intuition than mine for the signs of ascension and decline, I am the master *par excellence* of all of this, I know one and the other, I am one and the other”⁵⁴.

De Chirico lives an analogous destiny. “A figure of certain needs [...] and of a permeating sensitivity that considers the city as a form of concrete existence, an antonomasia of industrial civilization”⁵⁵. His images concede to be moulded according to different sensitivities. They are made of matter that will be incessantly modified. Like a capricious and elusive guide, they tend to take on the value of crucial theoretic and stylistic *antecedent facts*, which are indispensable for the comprehension of the significant

⁵¹ A. Branzi, *Introduzione al design italiano*, cit., p. 78.

⁵² G. de Chirico, *Sull'arte metafisica*, in «Valori Plastici», April-May 1919, in G. de Chirico-I. Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, cit., p. 27.

⁵³ On the 19th-20th century theoretical debate on the question of “the frame”, see V. Trione, *Limes*, in “Il Pensiero”, XLIV, 2005/2, pp. 87-117. On the same subject, for the philosophic-aesthetical debate at the beginning of the 20th century, see M. Mazzocut-Mis, *Presentazione*, in M. Mazzocut-Mis (edit. by), *I percorsi delle forme*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 1997, pp. 56-62.

⁵⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Ecce homo* (1908), Macmillan, New York, 1911.

⁵⁵ F. J. Bauer, *De Chirico urbanista. Lo spazio e il vuoto nell'ideare la città fra le due guerre*, cit., p. 45.

trajectory of 20th century architectural research and planning. We find ourselves looking directly at the father – perhaps involuntarily veiled – of much of the architecture of the 20th century. The urban metaphors that run through his paintings will *continue* according to different inflections, to give birth to the image of an imperial and idealized Rome, as well as to stimulate compositions that touch on nostalgia. In ways that are not always evident, many 20th century planners influenced by de Chirico recurate motifs such as the arch and the portico. Metaphysical daydreaming is something that will become a system of recurring formal signs and will be taken up by Europe's architectural culture in various moments, starting immediately after WWI. These images will be diffused with manifest lexical ambiguity, and imposed on the collective imagination, to a point where they are even seen in advertising⁵⁶. Progressively, these images tend to emancipate themselves from their origins and gain new meaning, leaving profound marks on representation as form and on the constructions that are given shape⁵⁷. It is for this reason that Alberto Sartoris could speak of a *metaphysics of architecture*: a tendency delineated by an “attitude” of figuration, carrying within itself the ability for strong introspective tension, based on a knowledgeable dialogue between function and ornament. There is a strong connection between de Chirico's paintings that recalls Doric classicism and the “communicative power of the art of building”⁵⁸. We are witness to constant recovery of images. The Pictor Optimus's work “provides” indications that are developed further. It suggests various characteristics of movement and reflects itself on distant screens, with divergent projections. An index of poetic rationalism, it also conveys anti-rationalistic tendencies, such as Surrealism's *modèle intérieur* and the emphasis on showiness of regime art. It laid the base for a change toward a monumental look, which spread through Europe after the war and is also found in Post-modernism⁵⁹.

De Chirico's icons are modelled on various insights; like magma that is continuously remodelled. At times these icons undergo a process of normalization, as Massimiliano Fuksas observes with particular reference to Aldo Rossi where he underlined how many architects of the 20th century reduced de Chirico's formal universe to a system of images – the piazza, the train station, the portico, the archway, the clock and the shadow – in such a way that all conceptual stratification is lost. Restricted to figuration, these architects prefer Sironi's compact volume to de Chirico's timeless deserts, in so much as they fall more easily in line with the intimate realism of Italian tradition. In most cases they did not manage to truly grasp the mental dimensions contained within the metaphysical inventions.

According to Fuksas, the architects that follow de Chirico's footsteps should rethink their work in detail. And not limit themselves to the registration of the present, but rather, offer a lateral analysis in order to enter into reality's inner workings. Not merely transpose “pictorial form into architectural form”, but rather express ideas: “the image connected to the concept”⁶⁰.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

⁵⁷ A.H. Merjian, *Sopravvivenze delle architetture di Giorgio de Chirico*, cit., p. 32.

⁵⁸ A. Sartoris, *Metafisica dell'architettura* (1984), in S. Holl (edited by), *Pamphlet Architecture*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1998, pp. 8-35.

⁵⁹ It comes as a surprise that one of the most provocative contemporary photographers, Oliviero Toscani, has “admitted” that his work is influenced by de Chirico. In the foreword to a collection of writings, Toscani speaks of an episode from his youth and refers to one the artist's metaphysical paintings: “I remember seeing one of de Chirico's *Italian Piazzas* with a train crossing and a statue in the middle. I must have been 9 years old. I think it was the first time I experienced a feeling of being disoriented in front of a representation of reality that went beyond reality”. O. Toscani, *Ciao Mamma*, Mondadori, Milan, 1995, p. 9.

⁶⁰ M. Pisani, *Dialogo con Massimiliano Fuksas*, in M. Pisani, *Massimiliano Fuksas architetto*, foreword by P. Portoghesi, Gangemi, Rome, 1988, p. 68.

Betrayed Testaments

Even if at times the de Chirican sintagma undergoes a process of cultural reductionism, it still seems to correspond to “a wide and collective need of certainty within urban space”⁶¹ and in the 1920s and 30s they contribute strongly to the reshaping of the Italian city. In 1933, Adalberto Libero published a project for a contest for *Palazzo del Littorio* with a complex of buildings destined to be built near the Coliseum beside the Imperial Forums. Among these, a building, which, although never built was planned to be constructed on the ruins of the Eternal City with the intention of proclaiming the rebirth of the Empire, of Mussolini’s “third Rome”. The same year, at the Triennale in Milan, Sironi raised a series of arches in front of Muzio’s *Palazzo dell’Arte* and Mazzoni completed his tower shaped like a tholos for the marine colony of Calabrone. These episodes, which pertain to an evident de Chirican matrix – open space, porticoes running to a vanishing point, big towers, empty squares and strong statues –, seem to carry on as explicit citations of metaphysical painting.

Many designers of the 20s and 30s understand the importance of de Chirico’s plastic intuitions. They are fascinated by the simple classicism of the language, the *absence* in the piazza, the solitude of the buildings and the Mediterranean feel of the atmosphere and the measured volume of the solitary constructions. To their architecture they often introduce the motif of the arch, an icon that de Chirico loved profoundly. It is on this element that the new grammar of a “new visibility” is founded as the expression of a *return to order*. These architects promote the recuperation of a rigorous syntactical objectivity based on precise rules. They affirm the centrality of craft, in contrast to the exhausting transience of late eclecticism.

Muzio picked up on this atmosphere with lucidness. In an article which appeared in “Emporium” in May 1921, he wrote: “A reaction to the confused and exasperated individualism of today’s architecture seems necessary to us, in order to re-establish a principle of order for which architecture – a socially eminent art – must have a continuity of style in a country, in order for it to diffuse and form a harmonic whole of the complex of its buildings”⁶². Keeping Muzio’s thoughts in mind, we notice unexpected events. The enigma inside de Chirico’s canvases, consumed in the silence of astonished piazzas or enchanted interiors, penetrates the real urban dimension. Full arches, porticoes in perspective, thin squared or truncated cone-shaped towers, roman walls and classical sculpture, are signs that pass from the *Italian Piazzas* fragile background into *petrified words*. “From the turbid and mysterious backstage, the metaphysical insinuation pushes and disseminates the marks of a profound attitude, even through the work of particularly eccentric designers as well as the more homogenous orbit of the so-called neoclassical group”⁶³.

The archetypal spaces invented by de Chirico are absorbed and become a part of post-war urban

For a long period during his youth, Fuksas used to go to de Chirico’s studio in Piazza Di Spagna. See his memoirs: M. Fuksas: *Valorizzare il brutto*, in M. Pisani, *Dove va l’architettura*, cit., pp. 25-26 and *Frames*, Actar, Barcelona, 2002, p. 283. For an analysis of Fuksas’s work, see R. Lenci, *Massimiliano Fuksas. Oscillazioni e sconfinamenti*, Testo & Immagine, Rome, 1996; and L. Molinari, *Massimiliano Fuksas*, Skira, Milan, 2005, pp. 9-59.

⁶¹ F. J. Bauer, *De Chirico urbanista. Lo spazio e il vuoto nell’ideare la città fra le due guerre*, cit., p. 50.

⁶² G. Muzio, *Milano 800-900*, in “Emporium”, May 1921.

⁶³ F. Irace, *Il “Novecento” a Milano: l’altra metà del modernismo*, in R. Barilli e F. Solmi (edited by), *La Metafisica: gli anni Venti*, vol. II, cit., p. 20.

planning, although this assimilation of ideas does not come about by means of cause and effect. Nevertheless, it can be said that the *Italian Piazzas* anticipated “the slow process of growth from 1920 to 1940 that allowed Italian architecture to free itself of the tired citations of the Succession and the confused eclecticism of the Umberto-style”⁶⁴. It is also possible to sustain – as Frampton does – that the scarcely illuminated peristyle in *The Enigma of the Hour* directly prefigures the soul of the *Nuova tradizione*⁶⁵. This claim can be compared to Arbasino’s critique, in which metaphysical spaces propose “perfectly Fascist” views, even though they were painted years before the march on Rome. De Chirico is an extraordinary *anticipator*. Entire areas of post-war Italian architecture take up his rites and myths. In his paintings “dozens of Sabaudia’s, often with a train puffing on the horizon and two palm trees or two passers-by, and no more” already exist. “And so, one would cross an Italian piazza on the way to the beach and perhaps sent a funny or kitsch postcard...”⁶⁶.

And yet, due to the typical provincialism and conservatism of Italy of those years, only the exterior features of the formal pureness offered by the father of Metaphysics were grasped. De Chirico’s daring scenographic inventions are impoverished to the point of being ephemeral presences. As the heated debate between Ojetti and Piacentini brought to light, these inventions were reduced to columns and arches. Since ancient Egypt, the column has taken on the absolute value of indispensable elements, the function of which was both decorative and dynamic. In Augustan Rome, the arch had the function of celebrating the power and the justice of the Empire: it does not cut space, but embraces it, bending itself “like another sky” through opposite driving forces⁶⁷.

Few know how to grasp the profound value of de Chirico’s painted architecture. His choices are innovative and experimental. The majority of his “heirs” will remain anchored to a non-critical classicism, intended in the sense of a return to the Roman⁶⁸.

Rome, Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana

Occupied as they are by “practical” concerns, architects often seem unreceptive to de Chirico’s dry and severe investigations, in so much as they tend to reduce the complex and stratified world of the *Italian Piazza* to an archive of citations⁶⁹. This is what Piacentini did. His simplification and reinterpretation of traditional models created dry, eclectic monuments, for example the E42 area in the southern suburbs of Rome⁷⁰, full of topoi that take, but do not reinvent, de Chirico’s solid and terse geometries and thus present a “poor, crude, vainglorious academism”⁷¹. The only Piacentini building

⁶⁴ C. de Seta, *La cultura architettonica in Italia tra le due guerre*, cit., p. 74.

⁶⁵ K. Frampton, *A Critical History of Modern Architecture*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1980.

⁶⁶ A. Arbasino, *E de Chirico inciampò nel filo delle Arianne*, in *Il Venerdì*, 785, May 4th, 2003.

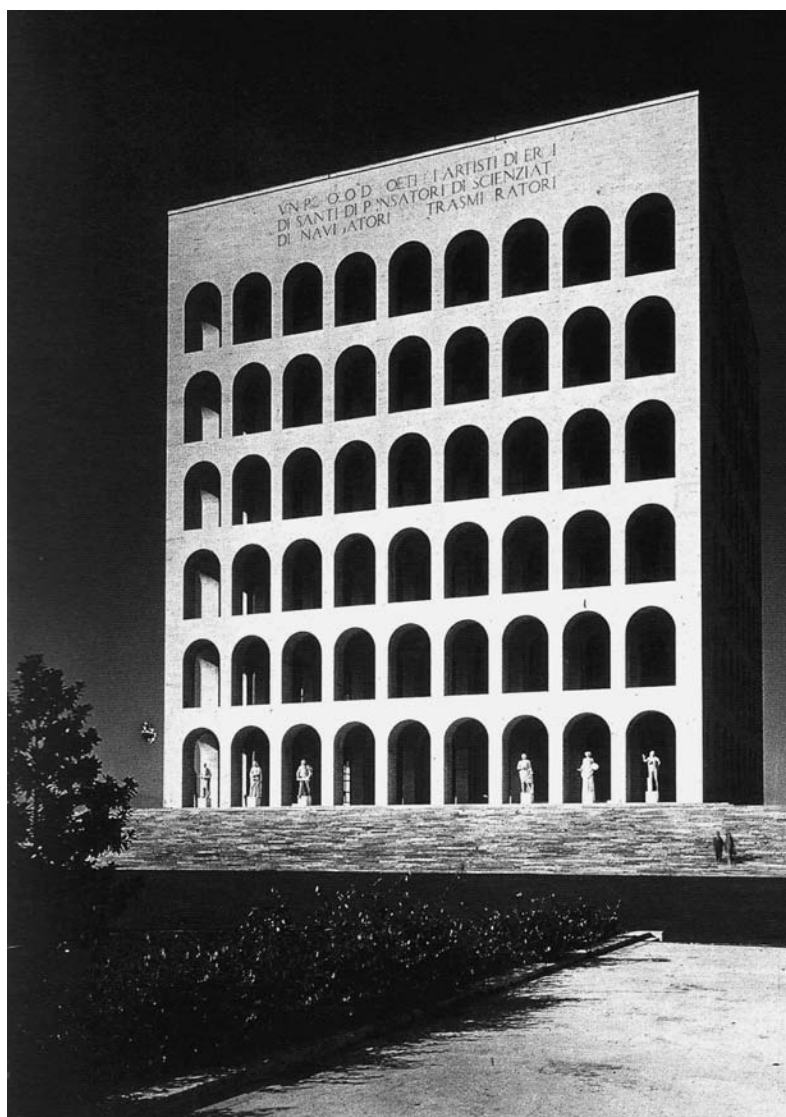
⁶⁷ U. Ojetti, *Lettera a Marcello Piacentini*, in *Pegaso*, V, 2, 1933 and M. Piacentini, *Risposta a Ugo Ojetti*, in *Casabella*, VI, 2, 1933. On this controversy, see P. Barocchi, *Storia moderna dell’arte in Italia*, vol. III, t. I, Einaudi, Turin, 1990, pp. 227-237.

⁶⁸ Branzi notes that Metaphysics had an ironic, “anti-authority” nature to it, capable of making fun of the regime’s monumentalism. See A. Branzi, *Introduzione al design italiano*, cit., p. 79.

⁶⁹ D. Guzzi, *Architettura e Metafisica: significato e valore della struttura architettonica nella pittura metafisica di Giorgio de Chirico*, in *Un Museo Immaginario per Giorgio de Chirico: 22 progetti*, Carte Segrete, Rome, 1991.

⁷⁰ With regard to E42 see G. Ciucci, in *Gli architetti e il fascismo*, Einaudi, Turin, 1989, pp. 177-200.

⁷¹ C. de Seta, *Architetti italiani del Novecento*, cit., p. 81.



Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, Rome.

that seems to directly derive from de Chirico's vision of Metaphysics is *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana* in Rome, which he planned together with Guerrini, La Padula and Romano. A six-story prism, covered with arches brings a faithfully rendered *The Enigma of the Hour* to mind⁷². The arch motif undergoes obsessive multiplication, both as structural value and decorative direction: an *instrument* that holds, from the inside out a perfect cube, a "pure model of rational-rectangular faith"⁷³. The "Square

⁷² K. Frampton, *Storia dell'architettura moderna*, cit., p. 254.

⁷³ R. Barilli, *De Chirico e l'architettura*, cit., p. 78.

Coliseum” portrays visionary classicism: a “residence of emptiness, shades of a columbarium”⁷⁴. It cuts its space from its surroundings, reflecting Metaphysical and Futurist tones. Various aspects of Marinetti’s vision are apparent: a taste for the repetition of a single formal motif and a straightforward communicability: architecture as “advertisement”. It is a building that allows one to read the past through a dialogue between painting, sculpture and planning. De Chirico’s presence is evident. From faraway, the facade is riddled with holes; from close-up it composes a magic territory in an incessant sequence of perspective and landscape⁷⁵. An order that de Chirico takes up again in 1975 in a painting – *Gladiatori nell’arena* –, in which a gladiator with the face of a mannequin appears with human arms and a bust, perforated by a weaving of wooden squares and pieces of columns (see p. 178). It is on a pedestal with its hand resting on a white parallelepiped. In the background, under a clear sky, is the facade of the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana*.

In Milan

De Chirican echoes are found throughout Italian architecture of the 20s and 30s. Protagonists of the Lombard neoclassical architecture, Ponti, Lancia, Mezzanotte, Magistretti and Muzio transformed Milan into a homogenous European area. In most cases, de Chirico’s matrix of metaphysics denotes a rather cooled-down purism that engages only the classicism of his vision: the solitary sobriety of sign, the clean line and the absoluteness of the image’s contour.

In Muzio’s work, ideas taken from metaphysical paintings align with citations from a Palladian repertoire, for example Milan’s *Palazzo dell’Arte*, the *Angelicum*, and *Ca’ brutta* (1922-23) in via Moscova, where “he manages better than any to summon the de Chirican proposition of the bare, essential and structural arch”⁷⁶. Historical forms are made compatible with the rigor of the right angle and the clean cut of naked, dry walls. Muzio sustains the value of a conscientious relationship between that which is new and that which is of the past. The rhythm of memory is to be understood as the base upon which the regeneration of form begins. Each and every project is to be considered in an optic of *duration length*, indifferent to style and “founded on the profound pride of its complete independence from the passage of time”⁷⁷.

Terragni, with his tombs, monuments to fallen heroes, the *Novocomum* and the hermetic *Casa de Fascio* in Como takes de Chirico’s imposing form and unites it with the suspension evoked by Sironi. In doing so he sublimates the conflict between architecture and nature, rationalism and idealism. Good examples of this are Rome’s *Danteum* and the monument to fallen heroes in Como: two works in which suggestions from Metaphysics and from «Valori Plastici» are felt⁷⁸. In his work, de Chirico’s hidden shadows delineate a space full of “waiting”. His constructions situate themselves in a territo-

⁷⁴ V. Zeichen, *Ogni cosa a ogni cosa ha detto addio* (2000), in *Poesie.1963-2003*, cit., p. 343.

⁷⁵ A.H. Merjian, *Sopravvivenze delle architetture di Giorgio de Chirico*, cit., p. 33.

⁷⁶ R. Barilli, *De Chirico e l’architettura*, cit., p. 78.

⁷⁷ F. Irace, *Giovanni Muzio 1893-1982* (1994), Electa, Milan, 1996 (3° ed.), p. 43.

⁷⁸ G. C. Argan, *La figura e l’opera di Terragni*, in *L’eredità di Terragni e l’architettura italiana. 1943-68*, a supplement of «Architettura. Cronache e storia», XV, 163, May 1969, p. 6.

ry marked out by Futurism, Constructionist and Rationalist coordinates. Influenced by Antonio Sant'Elia's manifesto of Futurist Architecture (1914), as well as the "timeless presence" of the objects in paintings by the artists of Metaphysics⁷⁹, he carries out a careful consideration of European Rationalism⁸⁰, where he attains severe, absolute form through a skilled calculation of planes. It is "an architecture of number and value" aimed at resolving mass and volume, surfaces and planes and line structure, placing "pure rationality" into de Chirico's disharmonious and dislocated spaces.

On this horizon other architects such as Andreani, Portalupi, Borgato e Gigliotti Zanini and Ponti are situated. As well as Pollini and Figini. Although each followed different paths, these architects make the "surfacing of memory" their own, by reading motifs from the past through contemporary sensitivity, making the still modules of the past live with dynamic nucleuses.

The Metaphysics of Rock

The Italian Rationalists proposed a style defined as "pre-postmodern"⁸¹, as an expression of a kind of moderate avant-garde. It is a solemn architecture that most often manifests itself in important buildings destined for public places. Such is the dimension of "aristocratic" Metaphysics. In de Chirico's poetics, exists a "less lofty" component: the area of "everydayness", made of peripheral zones, simple buildings and side-entrances⁸². The Argonauts do not go only to sumptuous piazzas. At times, they arrive in minor, out-of-the-way places, such as squalid train stations, dominated by clocks that show time's immobility.

Littoria, Sabaudia, Pontinia, Aprilia, Pomezia, Carbonia, Cartoghiana, Portoscuso, Arborea and Fertilia are urban centres that were built by the Fascist regime between 1932 and 1939 in the regions of Lazio and Sardegna, in which an architectural transposition of the places of Metaphysics are evident. Some of the most innovative and complex ideas of urbanism, on a European level, were elaborated here. The nimbus and idea of the *Italian Piazza* takes on a three-dimensional consistency, they become stone, in Mediterranean style. In Libia, at the same time, villages were built that showed a metaphysical atmosphere from the north, with desolated piazzas, cut by the unyielding shadows of the porticoes in a game of distorted proportions, stripped classicism and temporal desegregation⁸³.

The architects involved in this plan: Frezzotti, Pappalardo, Pontinia, Cancellotti, Montuori, Piccinato, Scalpelli, Petrucci, Paolini, Silenzi and Tufaroli enact a clear simplification of classical language.

⁷⁹ A. Saggio, *Giuseppe Terragni. Vita e opere*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 1995, p. 40.

⁸⁰ On Terragni's work see G. Ciucci (edited by), *Giuseppe Terragni* (1996), Electa, Milan, 2003 (5th ed.); P. Eisenman, *Giuseppe Terragni* (2003), Quodlibet, Macerata, 2004; and D. Liebeskind-A. Terragni-P. Rosselli (a cura di), *Atlante Terragni*, Skira, Milan, 2004.

⁸¹ G. C. Argan, *La figura e l'opera di Terragni*, in *L'eredità di Terragni e l'architettura italiana. 1943-68*, supplemento ad «Architettura. Cronache e storia», XV, 163, May 1969, p. 6.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁸³ A.H. Merjian in *Sopravvivenze delle architetture di Giorgio de Chirico*: "The fact that Fascist architecture does not manage to unite the past and the present in an aesthetics proper to Italian culture, forces us to look for precedence in de Chirico's painting [...]. Fascism's urban measures, such as "gutting", "isolating" and "up-rooting" are owing, to a certain extent, to de Chirico's work, with particular regard to the way objects and buildings are framed so that their myth-related value is accentuated. [...] Today, in Rome [...] the principal legacy of Fascist urbanism is not seen in that which we see, but in that which we don't see: the monuments that were destroyed or buried with the purpose of raising others in their place. Monumental impression is not obtained only with mass, but rather, with plastic unity, the isolation in space and the elimination of detail. The creation of a legendary Rome, a Rome capable of invoking the past and announcing a modernist future became a question of "framing". Such strategies owe a lot to de Chirico, more than has been accredited to him, just as Fascist aesthetic is in debt concerning the very architecture itself." p. 33.

Intermediate urban fabric is eliminated and the piazzas are placed in direct communication with the countryside. Sabaudia reveals strong, evident echoes from de Chirico. Necessity and space are rationalised. The presence of the historical city centre is affirmed in the new city through a sequence of piazzas and buildings, destined to diverse public functions. The buildings are inserted in the landscape according to the re-thinking of the axes and the visual flight of lines.

Dimitris Pikionis

The experience of Dimitris Pikionis, an architect who has been neglected by historians, has roots that originate in the realm of Metaphysics. His existential and cultural path coincides with de Chirico's solitary adventure over the years. The two met at the end of the 19th century.

Pikionis showed a natural talent for painting early on in life. After completing high school he studied civil engineering at Athens Polytechnic, where he met, along with other artists, young de Chirico, with whom he established a close bond. "We spent hours and hours under the Polytechnic's porticos, talking about painting and our plans for the future"⁸⁴. In his *Memoirs*, de Chirico remembers "In Greece I knew a young student named Pikionis who studied engineering and architecture and drew and painted in his spare time. He was extraordinarily intelligent, the profound intelligence of a Metaphysician"⁸⁵. In 1908, Pikionis moved to Germany to further his studies in Munich. He remembers: "I met with de Chirico the month before he left for Italy; he showed me some copper etchings he had made at the academy, and I, a few of my drawings"⁸⁶. The two artists shared a common baggage of dreams and icons inspired by classic Greek sculpture. At this time, his first experiments in art take place: the discovery Cézanne⁸⁷.

Their paths crossed again at the start of 1912 in Paris. They met daily to exchanging ideas and conversed on the subject of the "importance that the ancients attributed to nature" and on the role played by the *expression of solidity* in pictorial language. De Chirico tells Pikionis about his love for Böcklin. Pikionis later wrote: "De Chirico told me that, one autumn day, under a limpid sky (limpid is the word he used), while listening to the murmuring of a fountain, he found a book of Nietzsche's in an antique shop, in which the theory of the Eternal Return was formulated. Later he found confirmation of this theory in Heraclitus's enigmatic cosmology". These intuitions are the basis of an extremely innovative way of painting. De Chirico invited his friend home; Pikionis remembers: "I was the first artist in Paris to whom he showed the product of the theory of metaphysics he had formulated and which inspired his painting". One painting in particular strikes Pikionis, executed in an apparently simple technique. As he recalls, the figure portrayed had very little real about it and contained no elements that could be considered ephemeral. As such, it touched a dimension of the eternal. It is a

⁸⁴ D. Pikionis, *Note autobiografiche*, in A. Ferlenga, *Dimitris Pikionis*, Electa, Milan, 1999, p. 31.

⁸⁵ G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Perseus Books, Reading, Massachusetts, U.S.A., 1994.

⁸⁶ D. Pikionis, *Autobiographical Notes*.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* Pikionis writes: "I wanted to put into practice that which I had learned in theory regarding Cézanne's technique. Cézanne's revolution consisted in substituting the consolidated technique of his time with the third dimension of depth obtained by means of colour; research based on achieving polarity through chromatics [...]: this is what I wanted to experiment with. It was a difficult path to take, but is there anything that can oppose human tenacity? Every day I made progress, little by little, until I managed to obtain the third dimension through colour in a satisfactory way".

self-portrait in which the artist's profile is set in front of a window with his cheek resting on his hand, a gesture typical of Dürer's "melancholic" figures, "born under the sign of Saturn". The influence of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche is apparent. The figure is dressed in black, with his gaze lost in the night of visions. In the background the green-blue sky is limpid and cold. The words "Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?" are written at the bottom. This oppressive atmosphere is found in other paintings of the same period, in which buildings with clocks at a standstill, clear autumn skies and lines separating light from shadow are found⁸⁸. How many mysteries in that unknown world: "profound enigmas of departure and return, veiled by the heavy shadow of destiny weighing upon them... Enigmas of archways and porticoes... the enigma of the statue of Ariadne upon which falls the autumn light".

De Chirico speaks to his friend about Latin grammar and Roman architecture. One day, Pikionis receives a letter: "Dear friend, I need to see you and talk to you, because something new is happening in my life..." Their meetings become more frequent; they talk about light, perspective and colour in order to clarify the founding principles of de Chirico's aesthetics. Pikionis writes, "Then the enigmatic hour of separation came even for us. The next day I left for Greece"⁸⁹. It was their last meeting. Later on, de Chirico will speak about his friend – almost his *alter ego* – as one of the "most intelligent people" he had ever met⁹⁰.

Pikionis decides to abandon painting, which will remain a secret passion. In 1912, at the height of the Cubism, he returned to Athens. In 1921 he began his professional career. He became a planner, not by vocation, but by calculation. He saw architecture as an occasion to work: "it wasn't my primary inclination" he confessed⁹¹. His training is not specific; it is free from definite linguistic outlines and is marked by multiple interests. He had a precocious propensity for drawing and a clear sensibility for colour and then he arrived at architecture. He was an eccentric personality who felt the influence of contemporary art. Munich and Paris were important places for his studies, places that gave body to his talent. He wanted to approach the perfection of the models he loved, but found it impossible to do. He chose his teachers from afar: Cézanne and Rodin. From de Chirico, as well as one of the great innovators of Greek painting of the 20th century, Parthenis, he received "precious fragments from his culture of origin, transfigured with new dignity"⁹².

Like de Chirico's *Hebdomeros*, Pikionis creates a catalogue of broken memories, in which one encounters stories, feelings and ideas. He analyses and recomposes relationships and correspondences. He doesn't set the various pieces in a rigorous order, but rather, aligns the various clues in an ideal frame,

⁸⁸ From Pikionis's indications, in addition to the *Self-portrait* of 1911 the following works can also be identified: *L'énigme de l'heure*, *L'énigme d'un après-midi d'automne*, and *L'énigme de l'ariée e de l'après-midi*. Pikionis also speaks of a painting with Ariadne in the forefront. It is possible that he refers to *La lassitude de l'infini* dated spring 1912. Pikionis's citation is found in P. Baldacci, *Giorgio De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919* in the chapter relating to Paris 1911-1912.

⁸⁹ D. Pikionis, *Autobiographical Notes*.

⁹⁰ *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Reading, Perseus Books, Massachusetts, U.S.A., 1994.

⁹¹ D. Pikionis, *Autobiographical Notes*: "Of my aspirations, architecture did not occupy a central position. I was interested in it as aesthetical theory, as aesthetics have always been important to me, as has perception etc. They are elements that I grasped from the observation of space and plastic composition, the ideal object of which is the fulfilment of rhythm-symbol... Having said this, the study of theoretical synthesis and the science of material and construction, as well as the practical elements that an architect must acquire, is another thing all together".

⁹² A. Ferlenga, *L'uomo dall'ombra lieve*, in A. Ferlenga, *Dimitris Pikionis*, cit., p. 9.

according to a de Chirican set-up. It is an action of transgression with respect to the majority of Europe's architects at the beginning of the 20th century. Placing himself on the sidelines of the day's trends, Pikionis builds few works, inspired by a minimal composition and a simplicity regarding planning: elementary constructions, distant from the complex metaphysical "theatre stages". And yet, his work seems to explode with the many elements of which they were composed. He didn't aim for symmetry but preferred the multiplicity of events. Basic to his style is a fascination for the remnants of a compact and homogenous classical world. Pikionis evokes the myth and legends that transformed the rocky Hellenistic landscape into a symbol of culture. He starts from the wealth of tradition by looking at its roots anew. His creations come, not out of "nothing", but rather, from rediscovery. The artist must put himself before the voices of Mnemosyne, the source of all intuition: memory.

Like de Chirico, Pikionis gives life to assemblages by putting things together in a new order. He looks to popular architecture, Byzantine feelings and quotes oriental expressions. He looks to Greece's antique landscape, which in his imagination takes on a sacred value. He looks to fallen temples and investigates ruins in a dialogue between nature and culture. Like de Chirico, he proposes a difficult synthesis of innovation and memory. Without forgetting his roots, he is in tune with his own time: by taking on the fundamental questions considered by 20th century architecture. His objective is to stay in contact with present day reason. Proof of this is his interest for the artistic avant-garde, who he helped introduce in Greece on the pages of «Tri Mati» the periodical he brought to life with a group of intellectuals from 1910 to 1920. Pikionis thinks of Modernity as *necessity*. He goes beyond any kind of dogma of progress, yet, at the same time, he is not conservative. He doesn't propose a return to the past. He is up to date with the most innovative results of the architecture of Northern Europe and of North America; he is aware of and studies the experience of the Modern Movement (his Licabetto school in Athens). In 1930 in the intense atmosphere of enthusiasm of experimentation, called for by a desire of renewal, he explored new linguistic tools. His is a slow and solitary itinerary, along the lines of a *prudent modernity*. De Chirico is a faraway presence.

Pikionis's works include: the Athen's school projects (1931-35); the Delfi cultural centre (1934); the school in Salonico (1935); the park and walkway on the Philopappus hill beside the Athen's Acropolis (1957); the Aironi settlement (1959); Hotel Xenia in Delfi (1951); work with S. Dimitris Loumbardiariis (1957); Athen's Filothei play park (from 1961 to 1964). Pikionis creates a world that appears far from the atmosphere in metaphysical paintings. He always works from nature, looking for the variety of the world's geometries, from stories of antiquity as well as present day. He is convinced that architecture must adapt to the environment's rhythms, gathering within itself "part of the universe's harmony"⁹³. We are not in Eden. The planner's task is to bring out the fundamental aspects of form, which are immutable rules and permanent values. With sober visuals, Pikionis places faraway places side by side, creating territories that are compact, yet at the same time broken in different perspectives. Unity and pluralism converge in a diorama. Lexical elements seem

⁹³ *Ibid.*

to allude to things that have been lost and things that remain. The various aspects are composed in “musical” compositions, with streets, like those of the park beside Athen’s Acropolis, that remind one of the pavements of the *Metaphysical Piazza*⁹⁴.

It is a style based on fragile symmetries governed by rigorous prose, in which each piece bonds to the next. “Nothing is isolated; everything is part of universal Harmony. Everything enters everything else and is thus transformed. It is not possible to understand one object without it being placed among others”⁹⁵. In this light, architecture takes on a mystical force. It becomes almost immaterial, illuminated by the same enigma that de Chirico grasped in his paintings. Similar to what happens in metaphysical paintings, in Pikionis’s buildings the undisputed protagonist is mystery, understood as “an essential element of present time”, an element that coexists with simplicity and clarity. We are not witnessing the tired proposal of styles that have been overly misused. The Greek planner goes to the root of form in order to design architecture through the enigmas let free from the earth through myths and liturgies, which have been lost through the centuries.

Pikionis begins from the real, which he elaborates in refined poetics. This is seen particularly in his vast *corpus* of drawings, done over the years that show a decisive de Chirican matrix. He possesses an extraordinary talent for graphics, which comes from his training as a painter. His soft chiaroscuro lines and his sharp ink lines are seen even in his water colours and his note books, as he draws various aspects from a specific context. He makes quick sketches of details of a building, or a floor plan, as well as the context in which it’s found. The *Nea Peramos* series has something in common with those of Aironi and Delphi, which are exercises on an urban theme. The architecture in the *Rodi* series is lightly sketched. These sheets were conceived for the National Archaeological Service. “The memory of origin in the presence of ruins, the beginning and the end”⁹⁶ is a luminous emblem. Among indecipherable ruins, a shelter is perceived that clearly echoes de Chirico’s invented theatres. Using a set-up from the 1930s, Pikionis traces rapid marks to the left and the right on a page: the perspective of some buildings, framed on the sides. In the centre, there is a classical statue. Memory is carried to de Chirico’s work executed in Paris, of which a drawing from the winter of 1911 entitled *The Autumnal Arrival* (which perhaps Pikionis had seen). We are in *another* Italian piazza.

In the USA: Machado, Silveti, Moore

Many years later, in San Diego, Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silveti planned the *Fountain House*, and in New Orleans, Charles W. Moore designed the *Piazza d’Italia*. These two projects have much in common: “for different reasons, the crime scene is intensely re-evoked along with the hermetic barriers of de Chirico’s “piazza”⁹⁷. These matrices are evident in Machado and Silveti’s sketches where

⁹⁴ D. Pikionis, *Note autobiografiche*, cit., p. 35.

⁹⁵ A. Ferlenga, *L'uomo dall'ombra lieve*, cit., p. 16.

⁹⁶ A. Ferlenga, *Disegni e schizzi. 1940-55*, and *Dimitris Pikionis*, cit., p. 208.

⁹⁷ M. Tafuri, *La sfera e il labirinto*, Einaudi, Turin, 1988, p. 367.

they exalt the seductive dimension of architecture, understood as a polyphonic object. With a series of poetic operations, Machado and Silvetti explore the sphere of artistic and eclectic aspects of planning. The house is designed on a square set-up, with stairs on three sides. A series of archways perforates the side that faces the garden, like a section of a Roman amphitheatre. In Moore's *Piazza d'Italia*, similar "symbolic roots in classicism"⁹⁸ are found. It has been associated to the Vittorio Emanuele monument in Rome. From 1974-78, Moore, with Urban Innovations Group and August Perez Associates designed a small circular space in downtown New Orleans, commissioned by the local Italian community who wanted to affirm their cultural roots, at a time of ethnical chauvinism. The piazza has a large fountain and a large colourful scenographic instalment, marked by the free use of classical elements. Historic architectural motifs are filtered with irony by cinema and pop culture. It looks like a Hollywood set or a part of Disneyland. The prevailing atmosphere is that of an amusement park, with citations from literary sources, cinema and television. We are engaged in a local celebration of Italian-ness of one of the biggest communities in America's cities. A neo-Baroque machine, it is like a playful theatre it presents "a nostalgic image of Italian Renaissance and Baroque buildings and piazzas"⁹⁹.

In Moore, as in Johnson, Graves, Machado and Stirling, references to Metaphysics appear with clarity: arches, columns, clocks, variations on perspective and pavements. Various motifs from de Chirico are taken on with awareness. We are in New Orleans, but we feel elsewhere, in a de Chirican *Italian Piazza* that has magically become real, concrete, a place we can walk in. A similar sensation is found in the work of Aldo Rossi.

Aldo Rossi

Signs of the metaphysical alphabet run through Rossi's poetics, although the relationship he maintains with de Chirico's work is problematic. Although the *blue notebooks* written between 1968 and 1992 seem to be illuminating, they are not to be considered a confessional autobiography. From a documentary point of view they are imprecise¹⁰⁰ and seem as if they were purposely written for a *posthumous audience*. The dense prose is thorough and direct and deals with observations of his travels and encounters, with notes on architectural technique, and with remarks on life and about time, as it separates and consumes. The pages are enriched with sketches.¹⁰¹ In a passage dated June 19th, 1968, Rossi indicates his genealogy by a short list of artists to whom he feels close and places de Chirico's name alongside Boullée, Klee and Loos¹⁰². Two years later, in occasion of a contest for the *Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea* of Milan, in his notes he describes the "idea of a build-

⁹⁸ L. Sacchi, *Il disegno dell'architettura americana*, pref. di R. De Fusco, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1989, p. 62.

⁹⁹ V. Fischer, *Charles Moore*, in H. Klotz (edited by), *Postmodern visions*, Abbeville, New York, 1985, p. 180.

¹⁰⁰ Published posthumously, Rossi's *Quaderni azzurri* are composed of thirty-four small notebooks. The dates written on their covers are vague and do not correspond to the dates of the events written within.

¹⁰¹ A. Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri. 1968-1992*, edited by F. Dal Co, Electa, Milan-Los Angeles / The Getty Reserch Institute, 1999. See also F. Dal Co, *Introduzione ai quaderni azzurri*, in A. Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri. 1968-1992*, cit., pp. III-XXV; and G. Leoni, *Il pensiero architettonico di Aldo Rossi*, in "Area", XI, 51, July-August 2000, pp. 18-23.

¹⁰² A. Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, vol. I, June 19th, 1968.

ing” in the image of a tower that brings to mind the towers in the *Pictor Optimus*'s paintings (or Tatlin's work)¹⁰³. The same icon appears again in the project for the refurbishment of *Place Beaubourg* in Paris: the area was to house a library and a museum in the shape of a truncated cone. It is true that the structure was very different from the shape he described as “built of superimposed elements in homage to de Chirico”¹⁰⁴.

Reference is made to the metaphysical towers and smokestacks in a few pages dated 1971. On one page, a casual doodling of words and geometry, Rossi speaks of his affinity for cylindrical buildings with different levels that diminish in size the higher they go: “in the first drawings this tower was like one in de Chirico's cities.”¹⁰⁵. Other references to de Chirico's art are found in an article written around the same time in which Rossi affirms that he has always taken into consideration “the meaning architecture derives from that which surrounds it” with particular mention of the seductiveness of porticoes and piazzas, touched by shadows. He adds, it may be that a more precise and architectural relationship of study and reality does not exist other than de Chirico's *Italian Piazzas*; these spaces that derive from the observation of Ferrara, form a different and decisive image”¹⁰⁶. In regard to the metaphysical paintings, Rossi writes: “In the *Italian Piazzas* [...] the shadows mark the seasons and time. Often the piazza is composed on a single element, a single building that situates them inside a town, like Arezzo or Loreto. These observations come from studying art”¹⁰⁷.

These are important elements that can be related to what one reads in Rossi's *L'architettura della città*, which surprisingly compares to what de Chirico wrote in *Il senso architettonico nella pittura antica* (the architectural sense in ancient painting)¹⁰⁸. Rossi writes: “I often think of the Renaissance painter's piazzas in which architecture, a human construction, takes on a general value both of place and of memory [...]; but now, this is the first and most profound notion we have of the Italian piazza and it is tied to the very notion of space that we have of the Italian city. Notions such as these are tied to our cultural history, to our living in constructed landscapes, to the references that we make between one situation and another, and therefore the search for individual points is much like an idea of space as we imagine it”¹⁰⁹.

Over the years, his interest remains constant. In 1981, Rossi takes an aphorism from Cocteau's *Le Mystère Laïc*¹¹⁰: “De Chirico or the crime scene. De Chirico is also the hour of the train”¹¹¹. This image is once again picked up in later texts, where Rossi underlines his autonomy with respect to “rhetoric of metaphysics”¹¹², and states: “de Chirico is mistakenly cited in many of my projects; it suffices to look at the absence of time in the train stations. In Sironi's urban scenes the train has already gone

¹⁰³ Ibid. vol. III, December 5th, 1969. This note is dated January 16th, 1970.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. vol. VI, February-May 1971.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. vol. VII, May-June 1971.

¹⁰⁶ A. Rossi, *Architettura e città: passato e presente* (1972), in *Scritti scelti sull'arte e la città* (1975), edited by R. Bonicalzi, Clup, Milan, 1978 (2^o ed.), p. 475.

¹⁰⁷ A. Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, vol. X, 21 November 1971 - February 1972.

¹⁰⁸ G. de Chirico, *Il senso architettonico nella pittura antica*, in “Valori Plastici”, III, 5-6, May - June 1920, in G. de Chirico - I. Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, cit., pp. 39-42.

¹⁰⁹ A. Rossi, *L'architettura della città* (1966), Città Studi, Milan, 1995 (4^o ed.), p. 141.

¹¹⁰ J. Cocteau, *Il mistero laico*, cit., p. 65.

¹¹¹ A. Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, vol. XXX, March-September 1981.

¹¹² A. Rossi, *Un'educazione realista*, in A. Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi. 1959-1987* (1987), vol. I, Electa, Milan, 1996 (9^o ed.), p. 71.

by: in other terms, the train is lost. I believe that the reality of one who misses a train is always an upset and uncomfortable condition of time"¹¹³. This judgement surfaces again when Rossi places the *suspended* time evoked by de Chirico aside Sironi's *lost* time (the poet of the suburban space of streets and buildings). Desolated places that do not speak of ancient myth or bourgeois atmosphere, but that offer "moments from a destroyed city" and episodes of contemporary archaeology: prophecies of John Carpenter's New York cinema¹¹⁴. Nevertheless, over the years these annotations with a de Chirican matrix continue to permeate Rossi's work, like a whisper (analogous to what happens within the context of some of the most interesting achievements of the second half of twentieth century photography¹¹⁵). These are possible although distant dialogues, which are not an indication of clear provenance, but of convergences. Various scholars have brought these relationships to light¹¹⁶. Tafuri has observed how Rossi aims to turn his back on the world's noise in order to contemplate places of "an estrangement that has become sacred" as he regains an *imagerie* that derives from Böcklin's tragic visions and an "immobile look" from de Chirico fixed on spaces that have been abandoned by time. Rossi gives life to an *assemblage* that brings to mind the static fixation of metaphysical works, in which the eye lingers on that which is "sinisterly aligned or jumbled together", placed within an archaic silence¹¹⁷. These aspects were also investigated by Eisenman, who compared de Chirico's paintings, which are "laconic, restricted and concise to a point of the mysterious" with Rossi's buildings, saturated with memory and immersed in a "terse, minimal and distant reality". A connection exists between metaphysical painting and abstract architecture. It is a question of languages that are used outside of their context, where a sensation of uneasiness is transmitted. "These conventions: figure/ground, picture plane, edge stress, flattening of the image, deep and shallow space, are part of that which causes metaphysics (or an appearance of metaphysics) both in de Chirico's paintings [...] and in Aldo Rossi's architecture."¹¹⁸

Similarly to de Chirico, Rossi thinks of creation as an experience that is *primordial* rather than *original*¹¹⁹. His architecture is full of a distressing nostalgia, in which an escape from the poverty of the present is found in the echoes of past tradition, and defines an *art* that strives to identify its origins. Rossi is deeply attracted to the temples of classicism, which do not express the separation of time, but rather the strength of *being in time*¹²⁰. In tune with architects such as Loos, Terragni and Mies van der Rohe, he considers history as extraordinary material to model, a flux in which no break exists between past and future. Rossi lends himself to direct the poetics of metaphysics to the substance of things, springing from the live city "body" conceived as an organism undergoing incessant change

¹¹³ A. Rossi, *Un'oscura innocenza*, in A. Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi. 1993-1996*, vol. III, Electa, Milan, 1996, p. 9.

¹¹⁴ A. Rossi, *Rossi o dell'indicibile*, in M. Pisani, *Dove va l'architettura*, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1987, p. 142.

¹¹⁵ Ghirri is among the photographers most influenced by the suspended atmosphere of Metaphysical painting. De Chirican echoes can be seen also in German Objective Photography in artists such as Bernard and Hilla Becher and their heirs Gursky, Struth and Ruff, whose work brings to mind "De Chirico's metaphysical visions and Picabia's objectiveness". See G. Celant, *Obiettivo meccanico*, in *L'Espresso*, L. 46, 18 November 2004.

¹¹⁶ For an extensive bibliography of writings on Rossi's work (up to 1999), see M. Daguerre (edited by), *Bibliografia*, in A. Ferlenga (edited by), *Aldo Rossi. Tutte le opere* (1999), Electa, Milan, 2000 (2° ed.), pp. 442-457.

¹¹⁷ M. Tafuri, *Storia dell'architettura italiana. 1944-1985* (1986), Einaudi, Turin, 2002 (2° ed.), pp. 168-169.

¹¹⁸ P. Eisenman, *The Hour That Has Been*, in E. Coen (edited by), *Metaphysica*, cit., p. 101.

¹¹⁹ On the relationship between "originality" e "origins" in de Chirico's work, see R. Barilli, in *Tra presenza e assenza* (1974), Bompiani, Milan, 1981 (2° ed.), pp. 268-303.

¹²⁰ P. Portoghesi, *Dopo l'architettura moderna*, cit., p. 187.

that must never lose its identity. In particular, he emphasises the importance of monuments – which de Chirico’s paintings also stress – in that they play a central role in the building of collective identity. The monument is “a permanent element that conserves legend” and makes “forms of ritual” possible. It represents a fixed point of human creation – as seen in Greek and Roman architecture – and provides a sense of collective memory. Just like dates: “without a before and an after, we would be unable to understand history”¹²¹. Like de Chirico¹²², Rossi establishes a free and extraordinary dialogue with memory. He does not bring back determined styles. He aims to go beyond a “false idea of history” and holds that antique form must be studied, investigated, but also transformed. *Specific icons* are destined to be defeated and destroyed. In an album where memory, readings, visions and objects mould together, codes must be broken. Rossi distances himself from style and trends. He does not share the choices of those artists that want to start each time from scratch. He takes the lesson of the Illuminist architects into account (Boullée) and Protorationalist models (Loos, Hoffmann, Tessenow and De Finetti) in order to carry out an adventure that is “irrespective of the spirit of time”¹²³, in order to affirm the autonomy of the project. For Rossi, architecture is a discourse based on rigorous mathematical logic that also has a quality of ritual about it, of obsessions and customs as well as *oblique omissions*.

Like de Chirico does in his paintings, Rossi reduces the variety of geometric motifs to a series of elementary forms, filtered from the figure of various historical periods. He uses archetypes that form our collective memory, repeating these icons with continuity, in a universe founded on the *prime elements* of making, on a “few and profound things such as the extreme and veritable content of art”¹²⁴. Architectural form must rest on stable processes. It is “something that is closed and complete, and is, once again, tied to a logical proposition”¹²⁵; an expression of a *typology without time*. A master of the “restrained line”, Rossi takes a difficult voyage toward the “ancient house of language”. He draws on a book of essential figures, figures that are taken out of context. He looks for a *feeling of measurement* as he proposes a dry image, in order for an epiphany of lines to arise – the triangle, the cube, the cone –, which breaks up and unites. Behind this need for simplification, the present is strongly felt, mediated by interpreting de Chirico, as well as Cézanne, who invited artists to take the world’s sparkling array of colour and subject it to a rigorous composition. The world must be taken back to the cone, the cylinder and the circle. The painted image must develop these figures, part of every form, to create spatiality in the work.

Replicating the acts of de Chirico’s *Hebdomeros*, Rossi gathers impressions and details from his voyages. In his architecture he applies himself like a movie director, adding and taking away as he creates improvised relationships, without the pretext of healing any lesions¹²⁶. Architecture is an additive process that goes forth sequentially and by the overlapping of *pieces* – irreducible prime ele-

¹²¹ A. Rossi, *L'architettura della città*, cit., pp. 170-173.

¹²² On the dialogue between painting and art history, see V. Trione, *Atlanti metafisici*, pp. 59-71.

¹²³ A. Rossi, *Alcuni miei progetti*, in A. Ferlenga, *Aldo Rossi. 1959-1987*, cit., p. 13.

¹²⁴ A. Cantàfora, *Poche e profonde cose*, in A. Ferlenga (a cura di), *Aldo Rossi. Tutte le opere*, cit., pp. 4-7.

¹²⁵ A. Rossi, *Architettura per i musei* (1968), in *Scritti scelti sull'arte e la città*, cit., p. 333.

¹²⁶ A. Ferlenga, *Ascoltando le voci del mondo*, cit., p. 15.

ments – and *parts*, which are more complex and identifiable¹²⁷. Clean geometries that show their intimate hybrid essence, tied together in an unstable equilibrium. Rossi writes: “Individual projects are part of a whole architecture that I am unable to compose in its totality. Because I conceive them as fragments, in a formal sense they are, in that they exist as broken pieces of a whole”¹²⁸. Fragments that are, each in itself, whole and finished, and thus stick together without ever interpenetrating, along the lines of de Chirico’s teaching, who in an article written in his younger years spoke of the existence of two kinds of *solitudes*: a plastic one, and a metaphysical one. The first is tied to a “beatitude of contemplation that ingenious construction and the combination of forms (material or elements that are dead-alive or alive-dead) affords us”. Metaphysical solitude, on the other hand, is serene: “yet, it gives the impression that something new is about to happen in that very serenity and that other lines, beside those manifest, are about to enter into the rectangle of the canvas.”¹²⁹ This is where Rossi begins. His architecture and his drawings always allude to a feeling of waiting, which comes from the deepness of the emblems used. It is a sensitive diary that reveals the tragedy of time. A notebook of things that are about to happen, a Diasporas, or deserted scenes, and events that have not, as yet, occurred...

In New York, various worlds live together, without coinciding. A similar situation is achieved in de Chirico’s paintings and in Rossi’s architecture. They are creations that share the call of analogy in order to better understand the urban condition and weigh the images, with reference to archetypes and invocations from the unconscious, with the purpose of founding different places in daring collages. In December of 1969 Rossi wrote: “We can use references from existing cities and place them on a smooth and unlimited surface; and allow the architecture to participate, bit by bit in various events. Painters have understood this value of the city: de Chirico’s Ferrara castle and Sironi’s reservoir of Milanese suburbs. An urban landscape is thus built, made of planes and precise objects, of which we see the repetition and growth of the city through its parts”¹³⁰.

In order to reveal the world’s contradictions, the artist must reach into the depth of phenomena, to expose unknown aspects, tensions and balances. Reality must be moved from its field through the flux of energy. It is on this horizon that that which we can define as “the architecture of critical realism” comes into being¹³¹.

Form is taken from aspects of everyday life, in violation of reality’s registry. “External justifications” are annulled in an *invocation*, founded on a universe of rigorously selected signs. Solid figures and geometric symbols, reduced to spirits, find themselves in abstract representations, governed by artifice. A synthesis of letters is determined, emblems of an “empty sacredness”, “an experience of the motionless and of the eternal return”¹³². A hieratic purism; a catalogue of de Chirico’s invention, the poet of the suspension of sense, a supporter of painting conceived as *a thing in itself*.

¹²⁷ E. Bonfanti, *Elementi e costruzione. Note sull’architettura di Aldo Rossi* (1970), in *Scritti di architettura*, Clup, Milan, 1981, pp. 281-296.

¹²⁸ A. Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, vol. IV, January 26th, 1970.

¹²⁹ G. de Chirico, *Sull’arte metafisica*, cit. in G. de Chirico-I. Far, *Commedia dell’arte moderna*, cit., pp. 29-30.

¹³⁰ A. Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, vol. II, cit.

¹³¹ V. Gregotti, *L’architettura del realismo critico*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2004, in particolare pp. 3-46.

¹³² M. Tafuri, *La sfera e il labirinto*, cit., pp. 331-332.

In tune with metaphysical invention, which is far from all orthodox functionalisms, Rossi ties discipline and chance together. He proceeds by successive simplifications; he experiments tangencies that distance themselves from the rules of classical composition. His projects contain characteristics of evident theoretical clarity, yet are full of an incessant tension between rigor and fantasy, the conscious and the unconscious, logic and *autobiography*¹³³. He aims to make objectiveness, *subjective*: through the precision of design he reveals a cosmos that is tied to interiority. His buildings are abstract representations of the “inflexibility of one’s own arbitrary law”¹³⁴. Far from rationalist dogma, Rossi elaborates projects, which are often visionary, made up of illusory footprints, visual labyrinths and childish esotericisms. He causes the rationalist lexicon to relate with “the incessant flow of mental images and the artificial language of place”¹³⁵. He unites rigor with poetry, balanced between rationalism and irrationalism, ancient wisdom and fantastic inspiration, narration and visionary impetus. In a page of the *blue notebooks* dated May 20th, 1970, we read: “What is planning? As rationalists we investigate from a rationalistic point of view, even if reason can close in on areas unknown to it that seem irrational. An authentic rationalism must face even the most difficult, autobiographic aspect of expression. Architecture as art”¹³⁶.

Once again, it is possible to come across de Chirico’s poetic influence in these thoughts. In de Chirico’s work the *thing without quality* is sublimated and removed by means of a casual subtraction from context and by playing with shadow. “In Rossi’s architecture, the task of making the object speak and become an element of surprise is analogously achieved through the stillness and richness of the associations it brings to mind”¹³⁷.

These oscillations are found in various episodes. From the Resistance monument in Cuneo (1962), the Triennale bridge (1964), the refurbishing of Piazza di Segrate (1965), the Scandicci municipality (1968), the Gallarate housing complex (1970), to the IBM building in Berlin, the Casa Aurora of Turin (1983) and the Teatro del Mondo (Venice, 1979). In some buildings, the de Chirican influence is clearly felt, for example the cemetery in Modena (1971-78) and the Fontivegge area in Perugia (1982).

In many pages of the *autobiography*, he speaks of the relationship between architecture and theatre, a comparison that de Chirico also made, in his paintings as well as his critical work¹³⁸. For Rossi, theatre is a space where the “world of imagination” begins. He sets the scene on which man’s stories take place, among boards, armchairs, stages, fiction, words and actions that repeat themselves. A universe of *nonsense*, which exists only when the curtain is opened and the first notes of the orchestra are heard. That which goes on prior to the acting is a mystery. The “first beats are always a beginning and they possess all the magic of a beginning; I understood this by watching empty theatres, like buildings abandoned for ever, even if their state of abandonment is often more brief than daylight; but this brief abandonment is rich with the memory of which the

¹³³ M. Tafuri, *Storia dell’architettura italiana. 1944-1985*, cit., p. 169.

¹³⁴ M. Tafuri, *La sfera e il labirinto*, cit., p. 330.

¹³⁵ P. Portoghesi, *Dopo l’architettura moderna*, cit., p. 187.

¹³⁶ A. Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, vol. V, 15 May 1970-November 1970.

¹³⁷ P. Portoghesi, *Dopo l’architettura moderna*, cit., p. 184.

¹³⁸ G. de Chirico, *Discorso sullo spettacolo teatrale*, in *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, October 25th, 1942, entitled *Il teatro spettacolo*, in G. de Chirico-I. Far, *Commedia dell’arte moderna*, cit., pp. 204-212.

theatre is built”¹³⁹. Rossi writes: “This is the base [...] of architectural theory; a possibility for life. I compare all of this to the theatre; people are like actors when the lights of the theatre come on and they involve you in a story that you are a stranger to, and always will be. The spotlights and the music are not unlike the sound of a summer storm or of conversation. Although, often the theatre is closed, and the cities, like grand theatres are empty. The fact that everyone plays a small part is poignant. In the end, neither the mediocre actor nor the sublime actress can change the course of events. In my projects I have always thought about such things and the contraposition between that which is instable and that which is strong, in a constructive way. I also mean this in a static sense, of the strength of material”¹⁴⁰.

Italo Calvino: “The Cities of Thought”

From de Chirico to Rossi, we have gone through many stations: from one period to the next, from history to present day, from painted space to constructed space. The Italian piazza is a fabric woven from many threads, which shall then be woven with yet other threads, in unexpected weavings. Frames and more frames. De Chirico surpassed frontiers and effectuated stylistic inventions and linguistic experiments. His impossible, invented atlases will continue to live through the work of many planners. They become real, weighty. Painted form becomes solid. Monumentality is not alluded to, but shown. The arena of the painted work exits the plane and becomes sculptural, three-dimensional. The signs and colours evade the surface and migrate to the marble tracks, like notes plucked from the diapason of space. Similar to that which occurred in Paolo Portoghesi’s installation in front of the Estense Castle in Ferrara in 1996, where, on a reclining pedestal a scenario of *The Disquieting Muses*¹⁴¹ was enacted: objects and mannequins – possibly as autobiographical metaphors – took on a consistence and materialized.

On the occasion of the de Chirico retrospective at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1983, Italo Calvino spoke of *cities of thought* in reference to urban spaces in the metaphysical works¹⁴². During the reading, thirty slides of paintings were projected, running like a parallel visual text. The narration presented itself in a flowing of mental spaces dense with unrelated objects and temporary buildings. It was a voyage through the narrative and philosophical landscape of *Il Meccanismo del Pensiero*, originating in the paintings. A walk leading through the interstices of de Chirico’s creative process, it was a sequence of visions in an unprecedented *ekphrasis*. The painted urban spaces – from the masterpieces of youth to those painted in his golden years – were touched upon in a game of distant callings. One was struck by an indecipherable light that was “double”. It was difficult to say if it was sunrise or sunset, of dawn or dusk. We are taken to piazzas drenched in an uncertain sunshine, lost in the “thickness of a bottle-green sky”, carried off by quick passing oppressing clouds, like frown lines on a youngster’s brow.

¹³⁹ A. Rossi, *Autobiografia scientifica*, cit., p. 41.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁴¹ For an exceptional analysis of *The Disquieting Muse*, see G. Macchia, in *Elogio della luce*, Adelphi, Milan, 1990, pp. 199-206.

¹⁴² I. Calvino, *Le città del silenzio*, in “FMR”, 15, July-August 1983, pp. 44-52. See also M. Belpoliti, *L’occhio di Calvino* (1996), Einaudi, Turin, 2006 (2^o ed.), pp. 195-203.

Stretching out in front of us are streets “saying” nostalgia. There are open, uncluttered piazzas to walk in: spaces in which the horizontal dimension encounters the vertical one. They are places that offer themselves as continuous planes, marked by discreet, isolated presences. Chimneys, castles and towers atop of which flags and banners fly like navigators’ compasses indicating the direction of the wind. Unmoving and un-lived-in theatres, factories, villas and hills, columns and trees in unadorned rooms, armchairs and wardrobes with mirrors on the walls are the many items driven by a “frenetic force of attraction” as they come close and jumble together “from the human dimension and proportion”. Lastly, horses with flowing manes and tails dwell before temples and ruins. Flat and framed, everything is in its place: shadows, light and colour. One does not feel lost. The air is only “painted”. The ground upon which we walk is a stage-set. Empty porticos, barred windows: a disturbing calm. The perception of space is intense: in the silence the traveller tries to discern the voices of the people seen in the distance. At times, human shadows are seen. Hieratic and rigid figures such as mannequins with “bald egg-shaped heads, without faces” are present. They are muses that don’t speak, like tranquil emblems of memory with “the uncertainty of a moment that stays the same and repeats itself”. Imposing statues allude to that which is stable under the sun and suggest a precise way of *being* within the context: they ask us to remain immobile and allow the landscape to enter us. “If you place yourself in the right way in space, time will have no hold on you, the hour-glass will remain suspended”. One finds oneself grasped by anguish, teetering between agoraphobia and claustrophobia, closed in a labyrinth of piazzas and roads. These spaces feel tight, yet they are wide open: where are we? Similar to that which occurs in an oneiric dimension, even here the gates open onto the paradises of the mind, allowing one entry into a rarefied sphere. Premonitions, reflections and traces of profundity are felt. But we are elsewhere.

In de Chirico’s cities, everything is defined, exact, stable and permanent. “What is, is. And strange as that may seem, it couldn’t be any differently”. We find ourselves in places in which to live with our eyes wide open, in a “city of awakening, where one’s attention rests in a uniform and constant way on things, like light does: impassively. Unlike that which occurs in dreams, the mind is not a prisoner of that which it “believes it sees that provokes fear or wonder”, but can go beyond appearances: “to where the cosmic space of ideas opens”. The perfect guest in this space is thought itself. Heir of the “ideal city” of the Renaissance, the spaces imagined by de Chirico are made to receive the movements of the mind. Not to constrain it, but to hold and contain it and provide an elective temple for reason itself. Here, thought feels on the edge [...], and this state of uncertain dawning can be prolonged to the moment in which it will have to define itself into a thought”.

Urban emptiness “constant Italian mind”¹⁴³ is a symbol. Inside unending spaces, thought circulates freely: although it is not the kind of thought that is linked to things, but that which is poised on the horizon of the mind”. Brick smokestacks rise up on the edges of metaphysical cities “perhaps ovens from which thought exalts”? The mind is without choice in front of unmoving architecture in abandoned spaces, and has to stop and reflect. Light, shade, facades, objects and mannequins are posi-

¹⁴³ I. Calvino, *Collezione di sabbia* (1984), in *Saggi*, vol. I, edited by M. Barenghi, Mondadori, Milan, 1995, p. 516.

tioned in compositions that distant themselves from emotion and passion. Without obstacles, the mind can head in any direction with “steps, sometimes quick and sometimes slow”.

In an oscillation between the reassurance of tight spaces and the insecurity of *immense spaces*, the intimacy of the womb meets the thrill of the *open*. These different dimensions dwell one inside the other, in a system of Chinese boxes that depict an eternal immobility. An *imperfect metaphysics*, that sets the primacy of transcendence, only to dispel it in the prose of a world that is continually reshaped and always unforeseeable. These meditations remain undisturbed: “we are left to an absorbed and melancholic calm”. We are in the Platonic city of Ideas, purified of all residues, dominated by the presence of the angel of melancholy, the function of which is order, to take away “our anguish by hiding them in a collection of strange and asymmetrical objects”.

Calvino writes: “The truth is this: from the moment I entered this city, the city entered me; inside me, there is room for nothing else. [...] I don’t know how long it is that I have been wandering around in this city; I don’t know [...] how much I have changed since I realized that that which I see is to be considered as remnants, which I must leave behind me, relics of a world that the mind must free itself of to reach exactness, become impassive and gain transparency. I have no memory of the passions and troubles that obscure the mind outside of here; I have forgotten that part of me, which I left behind along the way; once in a while a doubt that my initiation has cost me dearly, comes to my mind [...]. At times, I think that as I go forward, following along the path indicated to me by this city, I will manage to put something that was broken back together again; other times, it seems to me that a final separation has been effected. But, just what *are* the two elements of this separation? This I don’t know”¹⁴⁴.

¹⁴⁴ I. Calvino, *Le città del silenzio*.