

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO: FORM DELIVERED¹

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First of all, I would like to express my gratitude for this invitation. This is a very important occasion for me, so I would like to thank the Foundation, the Academy, and Professor Dottori who invited me here.

As the title says, my talk will focus especially on the mystery of form. But let's make one thing clear since the beginning: we all know that de Chirico, whatever date or stage of his career we may want to look at, is extremely fierce against a good deal of modern art. Taken at face value, one could say that, to some extent, he was a conservative, a reactionary. Although, if we investigate the matter more closely, things are not as they appear.

First of all, what does de Chirico mean when he speaks about classicism? He says it clearly in a text entitled *Pictorial Classicism*: "Classicism is not a problem of augmenting but rather one of pruning and paring, of reducing a phenomenon to its original appearance, to its skeleton, to its signs and to the symbol of its inexplicable existence."²

Let's try to translate this series of statements, where it is obvious that the point is not, by any means, a classicist style of painting. Style is not the point. Here de Chirico is not referring to a style that needs to be recovered or brought back to light. Rather, he is speaking of a need for "trimming up". It is necessary "to prune", "to pare" the phenomenon. This is quite interesting. As it was said earlier, de Chirico, like other artists of the 20th century, was a great thinker. Professor Dottori knows this better than I do.

Usually, when I speak to my students about the great 20th century artists during my university courses, I always do so starting from their theoretical reflections. Mondrian, Kandinsky and Malevich are all great thinkers. It is now time to quit interpreting artists on account of stories told by critics. Enough with tales! I'll make some examples, because we should have the courage to speak the truth. Let's take Kandinsky. "He was the inventor of abstract art". Yes, right! "He gets rid of representation". These are things that art history books have told for a very long time. If we just read Kandinsky..., in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky never speaks about this. For him, the question is not not to imitate reality. He has nothing to do with this! But let's leave Kandinsky aside. But what we have just said about Kandinsky can be applied to de Chirico.

¹ Speech delivered at the conference entitled *Fine della bellezza? Dibattito tra arte classica e moderna*, [The End of Beauty? A Debate on Classical and Modern Art] 22 November 2016, Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, Rome.

² G. de Chirico, *Classicismo pittorico*, in "La Ronda", n. 7, Rome July 1920; English translation, *Pictorial Classicism*, in "Metaphysical Art" n. 14/16, 2016, pp. 49-51; quote pp. 50-51.

“Trimming up”, we said. Still, this phrase remains vague. De Chirico says “pruning and paring” until we are left with signs and symbols that can truly speak about inexplicability. Professor Dottori argues that de Chirico does not want to confer meaning. This is clear. We have to get to the signs of such inexplicability. De Chirico also adds that we need to “clear away all the superfluous masses and forms so as to allow the outline of the spectre to appear.”³ These words deserve an in-depth analysis. A whole seminar should be devoted to explaining all of these things, because the statements formulated by Chirico are extraordinary. So, such a reduction, trimming up, “pruning and paring the phenomenon” should lead us to sketch the “outline of the spectre”. Those “signs and symbols of the inexplicable existence” of the phenomenon have to do with this. But, and I repeat myself, it is all still vague. We don’t understand exactly what de Chirico is talking about here.

Then he adds that all this makes the phenomenon, which is the product of the experience, as Kant taught, the *phainomenon* [φαινόμενον], resonate of something that is – and this is very important – an evidence. “An evidence”, says de Chirico. Of course, we’re not speaking of evidence in Cartesian terms. But evidence of what, then? In explaining this, de Chirico is clear: the evidence that the phenomenon is not of this world. Let’s read what he writes: “In great works of art, form is evident and unreal at the same time.”⁴ This is the classicism that de Chirico is looking for in the great works of art: something that has nothing to do with classic style. “Unreal”, he writes. What the artist aims at doing by “trimming up” the phenomenon of redundancy that has nothing to do with the truth of the phenomenon itself, leads to an evidence that is the evidence of unreality. In other words, as soon as the phenomenon becomes evident, it no longer belongs to this world. The true form, says de Chirico – and again, it is he who is speaking, not I – “does not belong to this world due to the extent with which it blends with the surrounding atmosphere. This fusion takes the hardness away from the shape things have in reality.”⁵ This is music for my ears! Extraordinary! In sum: trimming up the phenomenon; taking it to an evidence that is the evidence of the unreality of the phenomenon itself, that is, of its not belonging to this world. But when does this evidence come about? This is a crucial point, because de Chirico is exceptionally philosophical in this passage: [Evidence comes about] when form, the true form, “blends with the surrounding atmosphere.”

These words should not be read superficially. We have to understand them! What does it mean “when form blends with the surrounding atmosphere” and “this fusion takes the hardness away from the shape things have in reality”? Of course, says de Chirico, from this point of view, modern man’s tenacious divorce from reality is nonsensical. They seem to have understood nothing. Why? Because the phenomena we deal with are *not* the reality. There are people like Kant and Schopenhauer in de Chirico’s philosophical background. Phenomena are not reality. They are

³ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁴ G. de Chirico, *La forma nell’arte e nella natura*, in “L’Illustrazione Italiana”, Milan 21 March 1943; English translation, *Form in Art and Nature*, in “Metaphysical Art” n. 14/16, 2016, pp. 124-126, quote p. 124.

⁵ *Ibid.*

representations... But my friends who are philosophers know these things better than I do. The universe, says de Chirico, is the product of our representation. So what's the point of divorcing and distancing oneself from reality as modern men do? De Chirico says that we never *meet* reality, neither on a canvas, nor out in the world. He says that we never meet reality. So when the artist is seeking this evidence, which is the evidence of not belonging to this world, he is seeking reality.

A writer who is very dear to me, Shakespeare, would have said that in such a reality the things – which being specific phenomena always do mean something, – say that they are not what they are. So, as Iago does in *Othello*, the *real* world says: “I am not what I am.”

The artist who knows what the real form is and, as de Chirico says, has a perfect vision of it that only he has, granted by his exceptional skills, takes the hardness away from the form for our advantage. But, what is hardness, what is the heaviness of the phenomenic existence, so to speak? How does the artist set free the phenomenic existence from that hardness? By taking away the outside layers produced by our own common way of looking at things, of handling and using them. In Plato's *Republic* – and from my modest point of view, I have to say that scholars of Plato have failed to see this – the Greek philosopher gave a very clear definition of our common way of looking at things and treating them. Yes, of course, theory against practice, but... So in the *Republic*, Plato affirms that the truth of things – namely truth, beauty, etc., – has to do with usefulness. The Greek word Plato uses is *chréia. Utilitas*.

So, the hardness of which de Chirico speaks, is given by the practical value of things, by the way we use them. The table is a table because it is where I sit when I have to speak, or place things on. That it is this specific table here... does not matter to me. What I care about is that this table works. This is the truth. A practical truth. But this makes things “hard”. Stiff. Why so? Because, says de Chirico – but here I'm simplifying things a bit – we look at things not for what they are, but in view of something that has a universal purpose, whereas a thing is always individual. In practical life, we don't care at all of the existence of a thing in its individuality. I don't care about this very table. Of course, I care that there is a table... and a microphone, but not necessarily *this* table.

The artist breaks that hardness that makes things taken individually irrelevant. He allows us to look at things in view of something that is a universal, abstract concept, in view of which we use a thing. It is necessary to bring back the thing to its spectre, to set it free from the universal perspective and its violent rule, free from universal finality. It is necessary to do, and here I quote de Chirico again, like “the old masters did when they made form mysteriously elusive.”⁶ A form that appears unreal, although it represents forms that actually exist. Why unreal? Because the table that de Chirico renders artistically is *not* a table. It is not that... It does not have a hidden meaning. In other words, the meaning as such denies itself. Therefore, it is unreal. It is unreal because if we consider a thing real only as long as it has a meaning, as long as it can be used in view of universal use, then the thing reduced to its spectre is what appears unreal to most people, to the imbeciles as de Chirico says.

⁶ Id., *Il Signor Dudron*, Le Lettere, Florence 1998, p. 91.

Of course this very thing is useless. It is obvious. What use do we make of an individual thing that cannot be reduced to its universal meaning and utility? No use at all! But, as de Chirico says, this is what allows a thing to become magical. He speaks of a magical form that as such – as magic has always done – radically questions the domineering Western rational, cause-effect, logocentric model of thought, thereby questioning modern science. De Chirico wrote beautifully about *magicità*... earlier we spoke about mystery, enigma... But what is this magic? If we don't understand these words, they might sound like mere gibberish. "Magical"... "That thing is magical!." Ok, fine. There are a lot of magical things out there! What does magical mean? First and foremost, magic radically questions what pertains to our logos. And what does pertain to our logos? Explanation does. Since we were little, more or less, we have learned that philosophers ask *ti esti?* [τί ἐστί] "what is". We want to explain things. But de Chirico says that this is not the task of art. This is the task of logos. But logos can explain only by subsuming individualities under universal concepts, as it always does.

Enough with chit chat! is what Chirico is saying. Since modern artists produce art that ignores what real form is, they stupefy themselves with grandiose reflections and debates... that require explanations. Artists often need... they call on philosophers to explain them. "Would you write an essay for my exhibition?" They want to be explained. This is the damnation of the artist who, in my opinion, is not a real artist. The artist wants to be explained by the philosopher. But, says de Chirico, as great artists capable of producing true form, we only have to "effect satisfaction", whereas today "art enthusiasts, producers and supporters of modern art chatter and chatter ceaselessly."⁷ Silence is our destination: "even more metaphysical are certain objects which for their clarity of colour and the exactness of their measurements appear to me as the antipode of all confusion and indistinctness."⁸

So, mystery is not mysterious and indistinct just because we don't understand what it is. Not at all! Here we are talking of clarity and the evidence of forms that have been set free from the hardness that results from practical finality, logical application, cause-effect explanations, all things that have nothing to do with art. We have to provide an experience of mere – mere ! as it were that simple! – silent satisfaction. Only then, says de Chirico, the mystery of existence shall finally resonate in the object itself. He does not want, so to speak, to draw a window overlooking the infinite. There is no infinite beyond the world, says de Chirico. We need to find the mystery in the object itself, since "we metaphysicians have sanctified reality."⁹ Sanctified. Splendid! In Hebrew, "sanctified" means "separate". Here de Chirico is not talking nonsense. "We have sanctified reality". What does it mean? It means that we have separated it from that logical and practical application about which we spoke earlier. Therefore, we have separated reality from logic and meaning. And we have done

⁷ Id., *Form in Art and Nature*, cit., p. 126.

⁸ Id., *Noi metafisici*, in "Cronache d'attualità", Rome 15 February 1919; English translation, *We Metaphysicians*, in "Metaphysical Art" n. 14/16, 2016, pp. 29-32; quote p. 32.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

so thanks to that self-denial of meaning that is separated from positive meaning. De Chirico says that, in fact, the early 20th century avant-gardes, for example “cubism and futurism” – he is making a brilliant association here – “produce images of this kind (some of better quality than others depending on the painter’s ability), which, even if they transform, break up and stretch the visual aspect of people and things so as to offer new sensations and a breath of new lyricism, they still maintain an element of meaning and are unsuccessful in transmuting the things represented, which therefore remain closed within the circle of common sense.”¹⁰ In other words, they only disassemble the exterior form of things, and stretch, duplicate, show the eye that can’t be seen – of course you all know whom I’m referring to – but in the end, what we have is just a disassembled mandolin. It is a disassembled mandolin, yet still a mandolin. This is the point. De Chirico, instead, says that we need to “earn” (and this is another expression he uses) the “senseless and tranquil beauty of matter.”¹¹ Now I’d like to go ahead, as I don’t want to drag this out for too long.

De Chirico does not want to go beyond the phenomenon, but to delve in depth into it. And he does so in a completely ambivalent and ambiguous fashion, which is all the more interesting. We have to understand that a thing blends with the atmosphere. What is this atmosphere? It is not the fresh air surrounding an object! The atmosphere is the context. Obviously, every single thing is in context, and without such a context a thing can’t be what it is. The context determines the thing. What does it mean, then, “to sanctify” it? It means to separate it from its practical use, that practical use that entails that a thing is always in context. For example, I couldn’t roam around this room if I wasn’t aware of the distance between this table, the chairs, the door... I can walk towards the door because I have that awareness, because I see things in context. They blend with context. But, as I was saying earlier, for the man on the street, context is practical context. De Chirico rejects this point of view and says that for the artist who knows how to look at the true form, this very form blends with the context.

Then, what does it mean to “separate” it? It means to separate it from the relationship with its context, which, in philosophical terms, is an abstract relationship. This is because a thing and its context are thought as two definite entities, like philosophers often do when, still today, they consider the relationship between a part and the whole. So we have a part and the whole, and if I come to know the relationship between them, I come to know the truth. But what is this whole? Is it different from the part? De Chirico understood all this. So, we know that the real artist performs a separation. He should be able to separate the thing from the atmosphere, although they are blended together – de Chirico is by no means easy to understand – ! So the artist should separate the form of a thing, of a phenomenon, from the atmosphere with which it is blended together. But the atmosphere is the authentic meaning of totality, which is not the meaning our practical mindset currently assigns to it. Totality is not a meaning. As Kant knew better than any other, and Kant is at the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

basis of Schopenhauer's philosophy, totality is unconditioned. It is not "something". "Totality is too big", "we can't embrace it because we are, limited, finite individuals". This is all rubbish! No serious philosopher has ever meant totality as such. "Totality" is non-partiality. Where that negation "non" cannot be philosophically reducible to anything else. The *me on* [μη οὐν] in Plato's *Sophist* cannot be reduced to *heteron* [ἕτερον]. Beware of thinking totality as *something* else. So we can separate the thing from the totality with which it is blended together in so far as – and here we can see de Chirico's extraordinary move – we can separate the thing taken as totality (that is as negation of its own meaning) from that positive meaning that it has in practical life, which is always in relation to a positive and defined totality. Here de Chirico is truly exceptional! Now we realise why "magic" is for him the form in which unreality and mystery become one in a clearly evident way.

In conclusion, this is why de Chirico's action is an extremely high philosophical action. Why? Because he says that the real artist is the "classic" artist. See? the word "classic" is resurfacing again... "Classic" has nothing to do with style. Yes, of course, we can play the cubists, create beautiful forms, the little horse... but this is not the point. Of course you know this better than I do, but it's important to understand de Chirico's philosophical conceptions, lest his stance may seem casual. He knows this very well and says: the *real* artist is he who separates what cannot be separated. He separates, sanctifies, what cannot be separated because it is blended with its context. Ok, but what is there that cannot be separated? Let's say it straight: we cannot separate the positive from the negative. And yet they are the exact opposite. I'm not going to quote Parmenides here. Being and not-Being. The exact opposite. They cannot have anything in common, that's why they are completely mixed up. Try to distinguish between being and not-being as Plato did in the *Sophist*. Not-being will produce something else. It is always like this. If not-being can be distinguished from being, then it *is* something, so it cannot be not-being.

And yet, this impossible separation is impossible. Why? Because, says de Chirico, it is an absolute division. The real artist can isolate the real form, and set phenomenon free from the thousands outside layers that prevent us from seeing. Seeing what? The separation from the inseparable, which is what the phenomenon, in truth, is, and the not-being of all things, especially those that the artist reestablishes. The artist shows what the separation of the thing in its not-being is, that is, the separation from its practical meaning, in which we need to distinguish the positive from the negative, but where we are inevitably left with *another* positive as soon as we isolate a negative. In sum, from a whole we select a larger part, another part. We need to separate the inseparable, have the courage to show the negative that, albeit never distinct from the positive, is nonetheless ultimately distinct from the positive. We have to be daring, says de Chirico, have the courage to be daring. What does he dare to do? The absurd. What great philosophy has always dealt with: the impossible, that is, what has to be. Thank you.

Translated by Francesco Caruso