

METAPHYSICAL, SPECTRAL AND POST-HUMAN DE CHIRICO'S SHADOW ON ART'S VISIONARY PATH: FROM SURREALISM TO CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION IN LITERATURE, CINEMA AND VIDEOGAMES

Lorenzo Canova

Like a mine that continues to yield up precious gems, Giorgio de Chirico's oeuvre still surprises us for the many fruits brought forth by his splendid influence, a generative grafting that has led to the growth of complex and magnificent plants in the garden of not only the visual arts but also those of literature, cinema and the new digital technologies, right down to unexpected outposts such as videogames and video clips. De Chirico has left traces of his very long metaphysical shadow on different genres and visions throughout the planet, from Europe to the United States and Japan, deep traces of his vision at once origin-based and future-bound.

It is well known that the currents of this metaphysical sea follow complex courses, often discordant and even apparently opposite, but always pervaded by the disturbing sense of mystery out of which de Chirico constructed what we may consider an authentic iconography that has marked the entire 20th century. This posterity, freed from the stereotypes of certain misleading judgements, can now "have its say", as the genius of Marcel Duchamp intuited in a 1943 text on de Chirico.¹

So from this standpoint we may analyse the influence of de Chirico's oeuvre in the field of the most innovative science fiction, in particular on some of the foremost writers and directors linked to a "dystopian" and visionary worldview such as J.G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick and Tim Burton, artists who in a certain sense come near to the posthuman poetical theme.

This line moreover was traced out by de Chirico himself in his words on Jules Verne, a science fiction writer ahead of his time, of whom he was a great admirer and who had a fundamental influence on his Metaphysical Art: "But who better than he could grasp the metaphysics of a city like London, in its houses, its streets, its clubs, its piazzas, its squares? The spectrality of a Sunday afternoon in London, the melancholy of a man, a real walking ghost, as Phileas Fogg appears in *Around the World in Eighty Days*? The work of Jules Verne is full of these happy and highly comforting moments; I still remember the description of the steamer departing from Liverpool in the novel *A Floating City*"²; "old Jules Verne, the great bard of the voyage, of the schooner and the steamship, the spherical balloon and the train."³

¹ M. Duchamp, *Catalogo della Società Anonima. Giorgio de Chirico. Pittore, scrittore, illustratore*, in *Scritti*, edited by M. Sanouillet (orig. Ed. *Duchamp du signe. Écrits*, Flammarion, Paris 1975), Abscondita, Milan 2005, pp. 170-171.

² G. de Chirico, *Sull'arte metafisica*, in *Scritti/1. Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici 1911-1945*, edited by A. Cortellessa, edition supervised by A. Bonito Oliva, Bompiani, Milan 2008, p. 287. Article published in "Valori Plastici", Rome, year I, n. 4-5, April-May 1919, pp. 15-18.

³ G. de Chirico, *Courbet*, in *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 296-297. Article published in "Rivista di Firenze", Florence, year I, n. 7, November 1924, pp. 1-7.

But it is the same de Chirico who outlines his own primogenitureship of the dystopian and science fiction vision of the second half of the 20th century: "For my part I feel there is far more mystery in a piazza fossilised in the midday sun than in a dark room in the depths of night during a séance. This error also depends largely on the fact that almost all those involved in occult sciences are people whose intelligence has nothing of the hyperphysical and who are fatally obliged to handle the phenomenon with that logic and inevitable *modus agendi* which men employ in all the manifestations, be they material or spiritual, of their various activities: political, religious, artistic, intellectual, industrial etc. But if some *truly intelligent people*, if some true metaphysicians should decide to hold occult sessions, who knows what new worlds, what unknown torrents of lyricism might spring forth. No one has ever thought, for example, of evoking spectres of cities, of things, of monuments, of furniture, of machines; of thoroughly examining the elusive aspect of instruments of science or industry."⁴

De Chirico even supposed the possibility of the existence of other worlds, as we learn from a half serious, half witty statement he made in the presence of Nicolò Martinico, Vice-President of the de Chirico Foundation, who recalled the event in reference to this essay:

One beautiful Sunday morning in November 1966, whilst Tina and I were visiting Isabella and the Maestro at their apartment in Piazza di Spagna, it was decided that we would all go to Ostia for lunch. We chose a restaurant with a large terrace above the sea in order to take advantage of the beautiful autumn sun. The lunch went ahead in the typical light-hearted and witty manner of de Chirico, who was the most pleasant of dining companions.

It was a time when talk of Martians and UFOs was often heard in the media. All of a sudden, with far-off eyes looking out upon the open stretch of sea, de Chirico exclaimed half seriously and half jokingly:

"Ah, wouldn't it be great if Martians came ashore right now... and recognised me!"⁵

We should also consider the privileged line that leads from de Chirico to surrealism, thanks to that encounter – as once more Marcel Duchamp has written – "between elements that could not be conjoined except in a 'metaphysical world'. These elements, painted with the most meticulous of techniques, were 'exhibited' on a horizontal plane and without any orthodox perspective. This technique which was the opposite to the cubist and abstract formulas flourishing at the time, was able to protect de Chirico's position and allow to him lay the foundations of what ten years later would become surrealism."⁶ From this fecund lineage grew a vision that has worked on the landscape and the human body in a wholly new way, with grafts, implants and technological developments for the body, mutilations and plastic surgery, hybridisations of human and animal, androids and robots

⁴ G. de Chirico, *Arte metafisica e scienze occulte seguito da un epòdo* (published in "Ars Nova", 1919, 3), in *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 670-671.

⁵ I would like to thank Nicolò Martinico for this unpublished testimony.

⁶ M. Duchamp, *Giorgio de Chirico...*, cit., p 171.

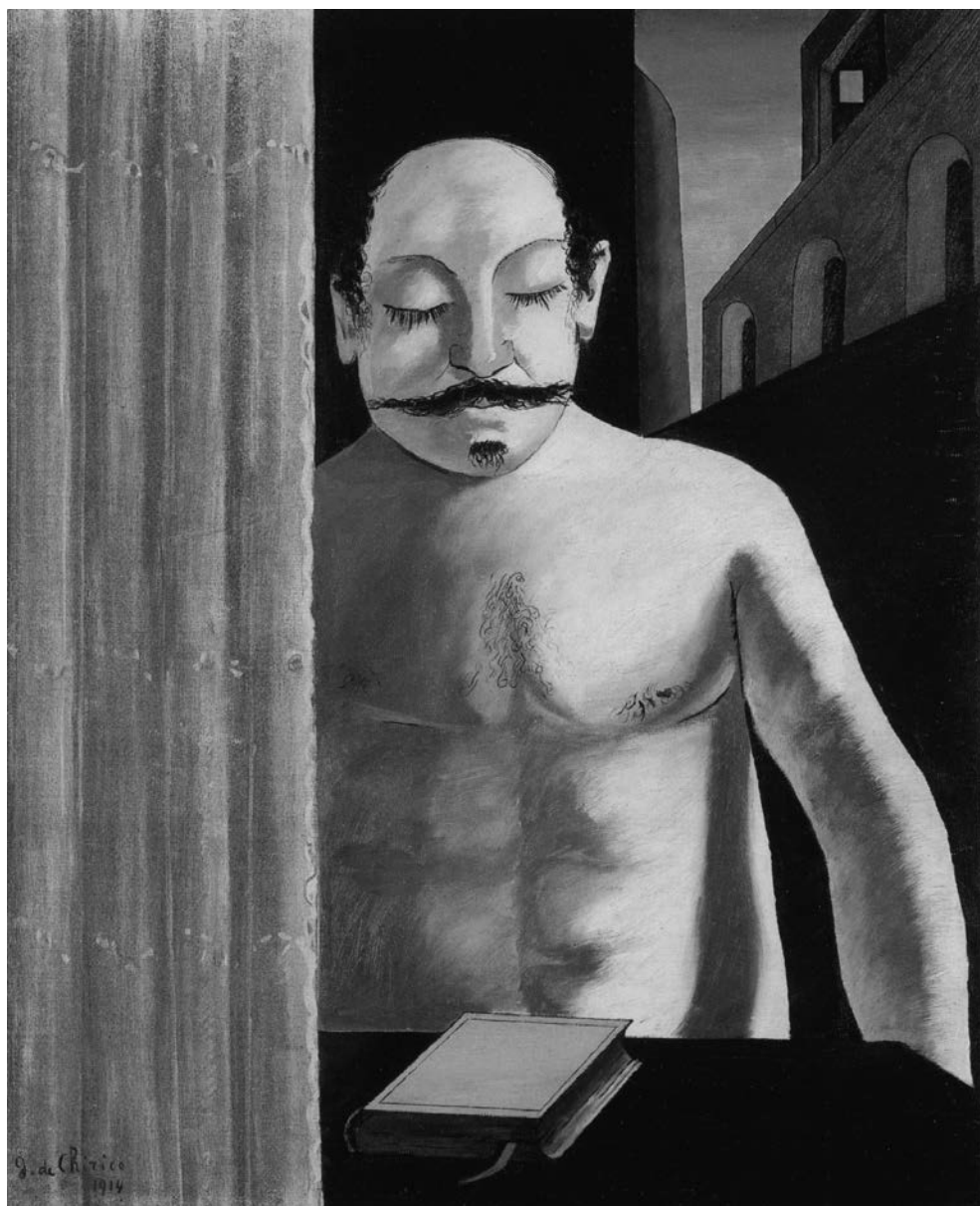


fig. 1 G. de Chirico, *Le revenant I (The Child's Brain)*, 1914, Moderna Museet, Stockholm

that simulate and replace man: following privileged currents in the visual arts which in the early 1990s built up the mosaic of composite interests united under the ambiguous banner of the posthuman, of which de Chirico is one of the noble forefathers. These intersecting and often complementary visions represented, also in a kind of Vulgate, a possible future scenario that would see man eliminated by machines or developed in his faculties by an infinity of physical, mechanical and dig-

ital metamorphoses, even more so than has actually happened in recent years. Not at random, the arts have made a primary contribution to this collective imagination and theorisations thereof through experiences in literature, painting, sculpture and cinema, right on down to extension of the expanding field of electronics and the Internet. In this context the seminal role played by Dadaism has often been underscored, from Picabia to Man Ray and Duchamp, and by Surrealism, on which however de Chirico acted like a germinal nucleus with his *Le Revenant I (The Child's Brain)*, 1914 (fig. 1). His work is fundamental to the whole of surrealism, with his piazzas, his mannequins and his meta-physical interiors (underlying the vision of numerous artists including George Grosz and Raoul Hausmann with his mechanical head *L'esprit de notre temps*) which open up to the "celibate" interaction of the sexuality of machines, the ambiguous union of contraries between male and female, the sexual impulses that give bestial heads and features to brides and to saints tempted by the demon, leaving a legacy that has come down today to artists such as Matthew Barney, Fritz Kok, Marilyn Manson and Andres Serrano. In this sense de Chirico's mannequins lead to the man and machine interwoven as if in an "exquisite corpse" by Stelarc and Jeff Koons, to the "pornographic" and contorted dolls of Hans Bellmer's "perverse" and unavowable sexuality, which announce H. R. Giger, Floria Sigismondi and Jake & Dinos Chapman, galaxy of the historic avant-garde heading towards the polycentric system of the contemporary posthuman collective imagination.⁷

In this context we should not therefore forget the role played by the germinal Italian experiences of Futurism and Metaphysical Art which made fundamental contributions to development of the historic avant-gardes and the movements that flourished after the Second World War, moving from exaltation of modernity, industry and progress in the "city that rises" to unease about grafting this very modernity onto the classicality and memory that generates the melancholy of a city in the afternoon, with statues and arches that serve as the stage wings for railway wagons and factory chimney stacks.

Thus, Marinetti's *Poupées Électriques* and *Mafarka il Futurista* (both of 1909, the birth date of Futurism)⁸ evoke puppets and automatons that replace their creators, simulacra and the superseding of man, premonitions of robots and androids, of mixtures and fusions between organic and inorganic that anticipate Philip K. Dick, Ballard and *Blade Runner* and go beyond the traditional vision of the automaton, rediscovering the myth of Cadmus or of Pygmalion and the Golem, without forgetting Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.⁹ The mechanical superman vitalised by the human spirit of its creator in *Mafarka the Futurist* and electric puppets that have become one with their creators opened the way towards Boccioni's man-machine in an itinerary destined to involve the visions of a mechanical

⁷ See J. Deitch (editor), *Post Human*, catalogue of the exhibition at Castello di Rivoli, 1992, Turin, 1992; T. Macrì, *Il corpo postorganico. Sconfinamenti della performance*, Costa & Nolan, Genoa 1996; F. Alfano Miglietti, *Identità mutanti. Dalla piega alla piaga: esseri delle contaminazioni contemporanee*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan 2004; M. Perniola, *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico*, Einaudi, Turin 2004; M. Belpoliti, *Crolli*, Einaudi, Turin 2005.

⁸ See F. T. Marinetti, *Poupées Électriques*, Sansot, Paris 1909; F. T. Marinetti, *Mafarka il futurista* (orig. French edition *Mafarka le Futuriste. Roman africain*, Sansot, Paris 1909 - but 1910 - orig. Italian edition, Edizioni Futuriste di poesia, Milan 1910), Mondadori, Milan 2003.

⁹ See M. Calvesi, *Le due avanguardie. Dal Futurismo alla Pop Art*, first edition Lerici, Milan 1966, second and subsequent editions Laterza, Rome-Bari 1971; edition consulted: Rome-Bari 2004, pp. 170-176; G. Agnese, *Marinetti. Una vita esplosiva*, Camunia, Milan 1990; C. Salaris, *Marinetti. Arte e vita futurista*, Editori Riuniti, Rome 1997.

humanity, ranging from Fernand Léger to Kazimir Malevich, Jacob Epstein, Fortunato Depero and many other international artists. Among other things, it is no accident that it was an artist of cubist origin, Josef Capek, who suggested the name Robot to his brother Karel to denote organic beings built in the lab as actual replicants in the 1920 play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*.¹⁰ This vision, which owes something to the myth of the Golem and of Frankenstein, foresaw the reality of cloning and biotechnologies, which has indelibly marked the historical period in which we live, by creating a reality that fuses with the collective imagination to give concrete form to a mysterious representation of the archetypal myths and imaginings of the writers of antiquity whose verses deal with the metamorphosis of men into dolphins, Daphne into a laurel tree or Actaeon into a stag, imagined with an inventive power worthy of a horror film director or visionary scientist. And then, a great number of antique works represent precisely the moments when those ghastly mutations were effected on the bodies of terrified victims, and it is not at random that art has often given form to strange "composite" and metamorphic beings: from Renaissance grotesques to the painting of de Chirico and Alberto Savinio, with their beings in human form consisting of antique statues, or of men and women on whose shoulders appear mysterious animal heads. So the strange situation of "hybridisation" that seems to dominate today's world does not appear so absurd to someone familiar with the arts past and present, where many contemporary artists are working on these themes, creating works in which science fiction and social awareness of problems of ecology and bioethics and the visionary are blended with mysterious and disturbing visual force. The hybrid images of Matthew Barney, his leopard women or his personification of a faun might have been conceived for the frescoes or the scenic and triumphal apparatus elaborated in the fecund "cheerful classicism" of humanistic Rome, prior to and immediately after the Sack, where the internationally widespread grotesque was born and developed, travelling to the pontifical palazzos, to Fontainebleau or Castel Sant'Angelo with its metamorphic and visionary images, where Eros exploded with its esoteric values, generating mutant beings, twofold and ambiguous.¹¹

In this sense the symbols of transmutation painted in the grotesques are linked to the hermetic context which was a fundamental and integrating element of humanistic culture between the 15th and 16th centuries. Those hybrid mixtures in fact left a complex legacy that came down through subterranean means to Marcel Duchamp – apparently an artist of a pure and innovative lead but actually interested in the occult symbolisms of alchemy – with his "maternal" urinal (where the signature "R. Mutt" may become *Mutter*), with the twofold Mona Lisa, male and female rebis, right down to the *coniunctio* of the "great work" of the *Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors*.¹² Duchamp's useless machine *Large Glass* and his "mechanical" and dynamic nude descending the staircase thus bring us

¹⁰ See *Who did actually invent the word "robot" and what does it mean?* See: <http://capek.misto.cz/english/robot.html> (consulted 26/7/2013).

¹¹ See M. Calvesi, *Il gaio classicismo. Pinturicchio e Francesco Colonna nella Roma di Alessandro VI*, in *Roma, centro ideale della cultura dell'Antico nei secoli XV e XVI. Da Martino V al Sacco di Roma. 1417-1527*, proceedings of the study convention in Rome, November 1985, edited by S. Danesi Squarzina, Milan 1989, pp. 70-101; N. Spector, *Matthew Barney, The Cremaster Cycle*, Guggenheim Museum, New York 2002; *Roma nella svolta tra Quattro e Cinquecento. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi*, proceedings of the convention in Rome 1996, edited by S. Colonna, De Luca, Rome 2004; M. Calvesi, *Venere effimera e Venere perenne II - Francesco Colonna verso la cultura fiorentina (e una troppo maldestra traduzione)*, in *Storia dell'Arte*, 109 (special issue 9), Cam Editrice, Rome 2004, pp. 5-92.

¹² A. Schwarz, *La sposa messa a nudo in Marcel Duchamp, anche*, Einaudi, Turin 1974; M. Calvesi, *Duchamp invisibile. La costruzione del simbolo*,

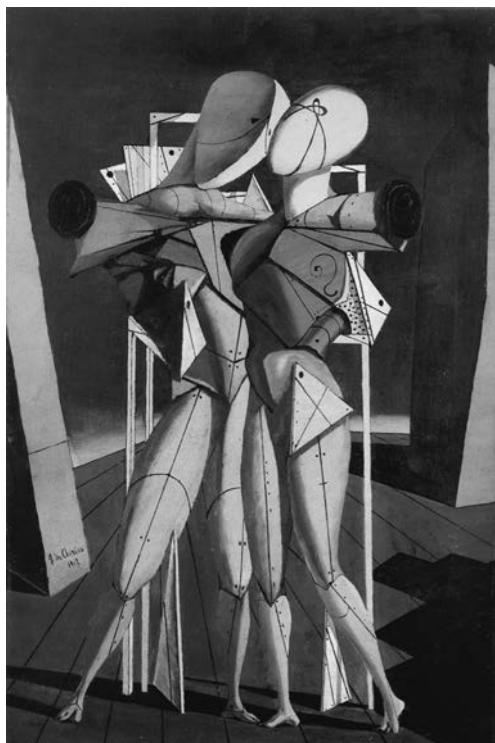


fig. 2 G. de Chirico, *Hector and Andromache*, 1917, private collection

back to the futurist automatons, which celebrated the machine as the superseding of man, and on to Léger and Malevich and to Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical mannequins, blind prophets and philosophers but clairvoyant like Homer and Tiresias, yet also interpreted as spectral simulacra of man, allusive and symbolic memories of a perhaps definitive absence within perturbing landscapes suspended between origin and modernity. In this way the familiar presences of the *Disquieting Muses*, the sterile and orthopaedic embrace of de Chirico's *Hector and Andromache*, 1917 (fig. 2) the amorous song of the *Troubadour* and the tower of *The Great Metaphysician* foresee the sexuality of Cindy Sherman's mannequins, the icy and standardized eroticism of Vanessa Beecroft's immobile models and the kiss of the androids shot by Chris Cunningham in the video where Björk sings *All is Full of Love*; without forgetting the robot falling in love in the great posthuman elegy of the recent animated film *Wall-E*.¹³

It is no accident that de Chirico aroused the interest of two writers on whom much of the collective imagination of the posthuman is founded: J. G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick. Ballard, author of masterpieces such as *Crash*, *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Cocaine Nights*, was one of the great innovators of contemporary science fiction, creator of a dystopian and visionary world (highly influenced, as he admitted, by surrealist art and by de Chirico as its precursor) which was subsequently filmed by David Cronenberg and taken up by the *Ranxerox* graphic novel series, Tamburini and Liberatore's "synthetic compulsive" (another android) which has had an acknowledged influence on young artists, directors and illustrators worldwide.

Ballard, as Jonathan S. Taylor has written, owes more to the vision of surrealist painters than any other science fiction writer, in stories where he evokes pictures by Dalí, Magritte, Ernst and de Chirico's empty cityscapes, above all when his aim is to represent the psyche through images of

Officina, Rome 1975; J. Gough-Cooper, J. Caumont, *Effemeridi su e intorno a Marcel Duchamp e Rose Sélavy, 1887-1968* (exhibition catalogue Venice, Palazzo Grassi, 1993), Bompiani, Milan 1993.

¹³ See M. Calvesi, *La Metafisica sciarita. Da de Chirico a Carrà, da Morandi a Savinio*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1982; L. Canova, *Visione romana. Percorsi incrociati nell'arte del Novecento*, Ets, Pisa 2008, pp. 177-199.

landscape, in what Ballard himself calls "inner space".¹⁴ He maintains that "speculative fantasy [...] the more serious fringe of science fiction, is an especially potent method of using one's imagination to construct a paradoxical universe where dream and reality become fused together, each retaining its own distinctive quality and yet in some way assuming the role of its opposite, and where by an undeniable logic black simultaneously becomes white [...]. The dream worlds, synthetic landscapes and plasticity of visual forms invented by the writer of fantasy are external equivalents of the inner world of the psyche, and because these symbols take their impetus from the most formative and confused periods of our lives they are often time-sculptures of terrifying ambiguity. This zone I think of as

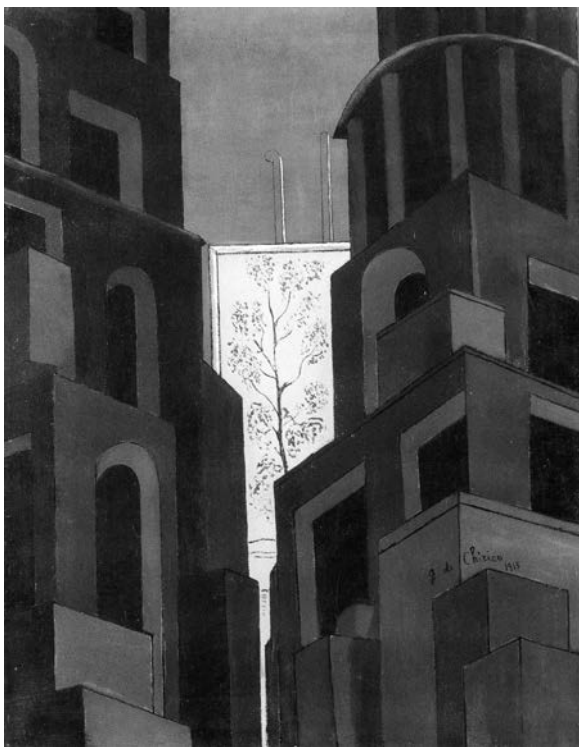


fig. 3 G. de Chirico, *The Purity of a Dream*, 1915, private collection

'inner space', the internal landscape of tomorrow that is a transmuted image of the past, and one of the most fruitful areas for the imaginative writer. It is particularly rich in visual symbols, and I feel that this type of speculative fantasy plays a role very similar to that of surrealism in the graphic arts. The painters de Chirico, Dalí and Max Ernst, among others, are in a sense the iconographers of inner space, who during their most creative periods were all concerned with the discovery of images in which internal and external reality meet and fuse."¹⁵ (fig. 3)

These words seem to have come from de Chirico himself, precisely in the cited essay on *Arte metafisica e scienze occulte* (Metaphysical Art and Occult Sciences) of 1919, so it appears to be no coincidence that in a 1966 text on surrealism Ballard acknowledges de Chirico's primogenitureship of the collective surrealist imagination, pointing to his method of juxtaposing apparently incongruous elements, where "the images of surrealism represent, as we have seen, the iconography of inner space, and where the first key document of surrealism is de Chirico's *The Disquieting Muses* which,

¹⁴ J. S. Taylor, *The Subjectivity of the Near Future. Geographical Imaginings in the Work of J. G. Ballard*, in *Lost in Space. Geographies of Science Fiction*, edited by R. Kitchin, J. Kneale, Continuum, London-New York 2002, pp. 90-91, 94.

¹⁵ J. G. Ballard, *Visioni*, ShaKe edizioni, Milan 2008, p. 39. (orig. title *Visions and Revisions*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). See also J. G. Ballard, *A User's Guide to the Millennium*, 1996.

like other surrealist masterpieces, shares an explicit interest in the nature of reality perceived by the inner eye, in our notions of identity and the *metaphysics* of our lives” [my italics]. Ballard describes the picture as follows: “An undefined anxiety has begun to spread across the deserted square. The symmetry and regularity of the arcades conceal an intense inner violence; this is the face of catatonic rhythm. The space within this painting, like the intervals within the arcades, contains an oppressive negative moment. The smooth, egg-shaped heads of the mannequins lack all features and organs of sense, but instead are marked with cryptic signs. These mannequins are human beings from whom all transitional time has been eroded, they have been reduced to the essence of their own geometries”.¹⁶

Speaking of this work and of other celebrated surrealist paintings by Ernst, Dalí and Magritte, Ballard highlights elements which were famously transmitted to the surrealist movement by de Chirico, such as “their use of the unusual, of the revelation of unexpected associations” in which our “trite notions of reality [...] may have many different meanings as they reach the central nervous system. Contrarily, the meaning of images projected from within the psyche may not have any direct correlation with their apparent counterparts in the world around us”; paradoxically, in Ballard’s view these techniques serve to isolate the few elements of the real from the melange of falsities that multiply in our life and to explore ontological objectives already fixed in a central manner in de Chirico’s oeuvre, such as space and time, landscape and identity, the role of sensations and emotions within these structures.¹⁷ In 1919 de Chirico wrote: “The early civilisations unconsciously exploited the metaphysical power of things by isolating them, tracing magical and insurmountable barriers around them; the fetish, the sacred image, the *xoanon* of the very ancient Hellenes are actual accumulators, actual concentrates of metaphysics. Everything depends on a certain *mode* of framing and isolation. The primitive does it unconsciously, following a vague mystical instinct, whereas the modern creator does it consciously by steering – indeed augmenting, doctoring up or astutely exploiting – the metaphysical quality discovered in objects. This metaphysical status is represented in the objects that possess it by a distinguishing mark which determines its degree. It is understood that intrinsically the graded object has the same worth as the ungraded. Objects thus decorated and trimmed acquire value and special meaning among the plethora of polymorphic or monomorphic volumes that encumber our planet. It must also be added that the object granted the patent of metaphysical quality should be seen *in a certain way* and from a given side so that it might appear in its true value.”¹⁸

So it happened that Chirico inspired another great sci-fi writer, Philip K. Dick, today considered a foremost 20th century American author, also celebrated for the film versions of many of his works, from *Blade Runner* to *Minority Report* and *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), inspired by St Paul’s vision *per speculum in aenigmate* (I Cor. 13, 12), from which the innovative digital animated film of the same name was drawn, featuring Keanu Reeves of *Matrix* and directed by Richard Linklater

¹⁶ J. G. Ballard, *Visioni*, cit., p. 43.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 43-45.

¹⁸ G. de Chirico, *Arte metafisica e scienze occulte...*, cit., pp. 673-674.

in 2006. Dick cites de Chirico and his mannequins in the 1964 novel *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (fig. 4), which also influenced David Cronenberg and in which a fundamental role is played by the figure of clairvoyant Barney Mayerson. And where *The Great Books Animator* is used by terrestrial colonists on Mars as an instrument of artistic reproduction which interacts with the body and human perception by means of psychotropic substances that put you into sharing mode with the simulations: “The Great Book I’m about to transform into a completely animated comic cartoon version, in the style of de Chirico, is Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* [...]. Just think: surrealistic, deserted perspective, ruined buildings with fallen Doric columns, hollow heads...¹⁹



fig. 4 Philip K. Dick, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, first edition cover, 1964

The visionary and “lysergic” interaction between man and machine under the aegis of classical thought and antiquity in ruins as evoked by de Chirico, the desolation of Mars and the images of abandoned buildings, are added to the hollow heads of de Chirico’s mannequins in a narration where the “non-sense” and the transience of the things described by the philosopher-emperor are united with the painter’s *vanitas* and Nietzschean “non-sense”, anticipating the scenarios of the mire and desolation of the abandoned buildings in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Dick’s celebrated 1968 novel that inspired Ridley Scott’s 1982 film *Blade Runner*, a masterpiece that has continued to influence the whole of sci-fi cinema for years.²⁰

But a dechirichian precursor may be found in the very idea – central to Dick’s poetics – of different planes of reality which overlap, interweave, and which lie at the heart of some of his masterpieces such as *Ubik* (1969) or *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), right down to the most extreme idea which sees the reality we live in as false, as in his last novels such as *VALIS* and *The Divine Invasion* (1981) or *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (1982), concepts which have had an enormous influence on numerous films like the entire *Matrix* trilogy by the Wachowski brothers (1999-2003) and Christopher Nolan’s 2010 masterpiece *Inception*.

In 1919, as we have seen, de Chirico was talking about a double of our world, solid and tangible and present in our everyday life. He even went so far as the hallucinated and already sci-fi image of a completely petrified universe, yet the very idea of the inexistence of reality and of the world as representation (reprocessing Schopenhauer in a heterodox manner) was clamorously declared by de Chirico in his *Il signor Dudron*: “The so-called intention that the moderns have to detach themselves from reality, replacing it with something else, is an effort as absurd as it is useless. Reality cannot exist in painting because in general it does not exist on earth. The universe is solely our representation. The uniformity with which this representation or vision is reflected in the brain of

¹⁹ P. K. Dick, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, Doubleday, New York 1964.

²⁰ See P. K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Doubleday, New York 1968.

man depends only on the uniformity of the intellectual abilities of people in general, those who form the majority of humanity. Consequently it is natural that the artist of talent, the one who detaches himself from the mass, must replace the vision or the conventional understanding of the visible world, the current vision of things, with a vision proper to himself alone, with a more perfect vision created by his exceptional possibilities. It is with these new and different visions, with the deeper understanding of things around us that great artists have, it is with these exceptional visions and representations which gradually influence or transform the representations and visions of ordinary people, that civilisation has been created over the centuries".²¹

Following these lines it does not therefore surprise us that a painting by de Chirico played a fundamental role in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), a masterpiece by a dystopian and visionary director, a film that completely changed the superhero genre (possibly the last memories of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*).²² Gotham City is seen with a gloomy eye, nocturnal and desolate as in *Blade Runner*. The presence of artwork is always fundamental, as may be seen for example in the museum scene where the Joker (Jack Nicholson) defaces a series of masterpieces, sparing only a Francis Bacon picture for which he declares explicit appreciation. In his films, illustrations and animations Tim Burton, who is also an internationally famous artist, acknowledged as one of the fathers of the Pop Surrealism movement, often uses oblique perspectives and long shadows that seem related to the painting of de Chirico, to whom he pays homage in the scene where Jack Napier, now become the Joker, reappears before his former lover Alicia Hunt (Jerry Hall) who faints because she believed him dead and now sees him transformed into a crazy and monstrous criminal. As a backdrop behind Alicia Hunt in this scene, Tim Burton and set-designers Anton Furst (Art Direction) and Peter Young (Set Decoration) – who both got Oscars for this film – placed a blow-up, slightly altered but recognisable, of de Chirico's 1914 *Le jour de fête* which, with its perspective overturned forward and its geometric-architectonic structures, underlines the sense of surprise, of terrifying revelation and disorientation, suspended between horror and irony, that pervades this whole scene dominated by the inverted relationship between the great portrait behind the Joker and the blow-up of the de Chirico painting (fig. 5) behind his former lover who will be vengefully disfigured by the monstrous scornful and grinning character.²³

This citation could almost be considered cinematographic redress for the celebrated dream sequence designed by Salvador Dalí for Alfred Hitchcock's 1945 film *Spellbound*, in which the symbolic presence of eyes and revelatory vision beyond the glance, the sloping perspectives, the long diagonal shadows and the figure of the faceless character seem to be so influenced by de Chirico's painting as to touch on plagiarism.

²¹ G. de Chirico, *Il signor Dudron*, in *Scritti/1...*, cit., pp. 257-258.

²² For a general treatment of the much debated subject see Meggs, Dylan Fort, *Why not rule the world? Nietzsche, the Übermensch, and Contemporary superheroes*, 2009, University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects. See: http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_chanhonoproj/1296 (consulted 29/7/2013).

²³ See R. Magliozzi, J. He, *Tim Burton*, exhibition catalogue, New York, MoMA, 2009, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2009.

But getting back to Tim Burton and his freaks (all far from the context of shared social acknowledgement, both Batman and the Joker) and to one of his early masterpieces *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), in which the main character has sharp shears instead of hands, we might reflect on a certain vision of a mixture between organic and inorganic, where de Chirico's archaeologists could represent the extreme mutation of the mannequin,



fig. 5 Set design from the film *Batman*, directed by Tim Burton, 1989

using a part of the human body on which to graft elements consisting of pediments, capitals, buildings and citations of Mediterranean landscapes. In this context the mannequins themselves are inserted in the flow of memory evoked by de Chirico who, in a poem of 1917, in which he places himself on the stage of a strange Ferrarese cityscape of “dreams undreamt” constructed by demons to announce his extreme and posthuman mutation into a statue wrote: “One day I too will be a man of rock / Widowed bridegroom on an Etruscan sarcophagus. / Hold me motherly that day / In your great embrace of stone.”²⁴ Thus in *Blade Runner*, in a Los Angeles of “surrealistic perspective and abandoned buildings in ruins” the living and artificial replicant-mannequin Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), leader of the fleeing replicants (who have human sensibility, unlike the cold and unempathetic androids of Dick’s novel), puts his trust in cosmic and almost metaphysical recollections to affirm his dignity as a being defeated by time, a dignity founded on the value of memory: “I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.”²⁵ It is not at random that in the film’s images the dying Roy Batty, prior to freeing the dove (symbol of his replicant’s soul?), inclines his head, “citing” *The Dying Galatian*, a celebrated Roman copy of the Hellenic sculpture that paid tribute to the courage of the “barbarian” Celts, defeated like the replicants eliminated by Roy Deckard. In this way science fiction and dystopia, like an alchemical Ouroboros, come together *à rebours* in the comfort of memory and in the nostalgia of classicality where the celestial hunter and the husband of Venus fuse with the anamnesis of the replicants and the embrace of the mannequins to create a new, disquieting elegy of the future.

This journey, merely hinted at and yet to be studied in depth – also by means of a possible exhibition – ends in the shadow kingdom of the popular videogame for Playstation 2 *Ico* (perhaps not by chance the last three letters of the name de Chirico) where the homonymous boy, another freak, excluded from his village because his white horns are seen as ill-omened, lives his adventure

²⁴ G. de Chirico, *Epòdo*, in *Arte metafisica e scienze occulte...*, cit., p. 674.

²⁵ *Blade Runner. The Final Cut*. Special edition, 2 discs. Warner Home Video. DVD, original and Italian versions, 2007.



fig. 6 G. de Chirico, *Battle on the Bridge*, 1969, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

in a castle high on Böcklinian rocks with labyrinthine spaces that evoke suggestions of Piranesi and Escher, with slashes of light and shadow that perhaps evince a dechirichian influence, such as the dark adversaries fought by the protagonist who recall the black silhouettes with bright eyes painted by the *Pictor Optimus* in, for example, the *Battle on the Bridge*, 1969 (fig. 6).

So it is no accident that for the cover of the European and Japanese version of *Ico* the videogame designer Fumito Ueda (who studied art history) created an image that explicitly recalls de Chirico's well known metaphysical pictures *The Nostalgia of the Infinite* and *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, stating in an interview that de Chirico's "surrealistic" world corresponds to that of *Ico*.²⁶

Thus the influence of the great Metaphysician has spread throughout the complex and multilayered production of contemporary images, regenerating different forms of expressiveness that reach a truly vast public, differentiated and including all generations, demonstrating how de Chirico is indubitably one of the very few 20th century artists capable of going beyond his own time, not only appreciated and admired but an integral and always renewed part of contemporary experience, be it literature, cinema, painting or electronic arts.

Translated by David Smith

²⁶ "I designed the Japanese cover, and I thought the surrealistic world of de Chirico matched the allegoric world of *Ico*", in J. Mielke, J. Rybicki, *A Giant in the Making. How Shadow of the Colossus Came to Be* (23-9-2005). See: <http://www.1up.com/do/feature?pager.offset=2&cid=3143702> (consulted 26/7/2013); L. Plunkett, *The Inspiration Behind Ico's Cover Art* (30/11/2011), see: <http://kotaku.com/5863620/the-inspiration-behind-icos-iconic-cover-art> (consulted 26/7/2013).