

THE DISCREET CHARM OF METAPHYSICS:
THE WRITINGS OF GIORGIO DE CHIRICO IN THE CINEMA OF LUIS BUÑUEL

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...the Golden Age is the immanent reality to which all of us, by our daily living, are either contributing or failing to contribute. The world is what we make it each day, or what we fail to make it. If it is lunacy that we have on our hands today then it is we who are the lunatics.

Henry Miller, *Max and the White Phagocytes*

“The cinema is a theatre of ghosts” (G. de Chirico)¹

Giorgio de Chirico's interest in cinema is clearly expressed in his famous text of 1943, *Discorso sul cinematografo* (*Discourse on cinema*). De Chirico always preferred theatre but he makes an interesting comparison between cinema and theatre in this text and precisely defines the qualities of a good film. First and foremost, he felt it was important to underline how emotions aroused by watching a film are sentimental and not metaphysical because the actors do not participate in the flesh but rather as visions, ghosts of themselves, images that pass by one after the other on the screen. Whereas emotions at the theatre are undoubtedly metaphysical because we find ourselves faced with a world that is magical and unreal and at the same time clear and concrete, “basically it *exists materially*” and is very specifically theatrical.²

Furthermore a good film must develop principally by means of action with brief dialogues to support it. “A filmmaker's real resource and his real power are movement and the possibility of travelling from one end of the earth to the other in an instant.” Without in any way detracting from the importance of the subject (de Chirico in fact underlines that “the first condition of a good film is an interesting subject, clearly driven by movement and action”), he however specifies that “it is the *real-*

¹ For the illustrations which accompany this essay, see the Italian text *Il fascino discreto della metafisica: gli scritti di Giorgio de Chirico nel cinema di Luis Buñuel* in this Periodical, pp. 263-279.

² Unless otherwise specified all quotes found in this and the following paragraphs are taken from G. de Chirico, *Discorso sul cinematografo*, in G. de Chirico, *Il meccanismo del pensiero*, edited by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, Einaudi, Turin 1985, pp. 413- 421.

isation, the execution of it, that determines the success of a film". In fact, the connection or the thread of communication with the audience (i.e. the language of the film) are actually images ("a film is a tale narrated by images and not by words") and therefore images "must possess all the qualities, as much material as spiritual". It is actually through images that the audience becomes completely absorbed and drawn into a world that thrills them, that makes them forget their normal existence and lets them live an emotionally more intense life that is paradoxically more concrete and more concentrated. "A filmmaker's success [should be looked for] in the possibility he offers to a person to live a life in one evening that is more sparkling and interesting than his own life, which is usually the sort of grey, mediocre and boring life to which most men are condemned". For this reason the plot must be simple and linear and the feelings expressed as close as possible to man's feelings and behaviour. The concrete action carried out by ghosts that do not materially exist creates an important contrast thanks to which it is possible "to feel the distressing emotion of the drama or... the comic value of a silly scene". Later in the text, de Chirico deals with the more technical side and gives significant advice despite the fact that he still had not taken part in making a film at this point in time. Firstly, he strongly advises against complete and protracted *darkness* (even in nocturnal scenes for which he states a "certain darkening" is sufficient) because scenes in general should "always be light and visible". This *luminosity* applies even more to films with a modern subject (i.e. not historical) which can be filmed in natural habitats and in which the photography must be well executed. "Details in scenery filmed from life do not stand out; the subtleties of light are reduced and colours are missing entirely or, worse still, in a colour film, colours are completely distorted." In his writings, he frequently repeats the need to film all scenes for period films in studios, i.e. with constructed, artificial sets, because "when you see actors in costume, playing characters from past centuries, in the middle of real scenery, the scene suddenly takes on an artificial appearance ... and thus the characters in turn seem artificial". He had already mentioned this concept in *Hebdomeros*, written in 1928: "...a film set made of wood and cardboard is always more 'authentic' than a natural one. But try telling that to the film directors who spend their time looking for fine sites and picturesque vistas; alas, they understand nothing!"³

Another interesting detail regards production. De Chirico maintains that a film must conform and in some way represent the qualities and the characteristics, as well as the natural and special resources, of the country that produces it, and completely avoid imitating films produced abroad so as not to fall into artifice and ridicule.

The text closes with the fundamental and universal principle which de Chirico always maintained: know your craft well. "You can do anything by creating and producing, provided that it is *done well*, as it is in the *doing well*, it is in the *quality*, that we find the interest and the value of every artistic creation and production, in art as in theatre and cinema".

³ G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, with an introduction by J. A. Hodkinson, The Four Seasons Book Society, New York, 1966, p. 97. He returned to the subject in *Metafisica dell'America* in 1938, in which he stated: "You can see the same phenomenon happening in the cinema auditorium when period films are shown. When actors in costume move around in real landscapes, trees, fields, mountains, any real nature looks fake next to the characters in costume. [...] Thus I suggest, as much to our directors [in Italy] as to those abroad that, if they do not want to make jarring and rather unintelligent films, they should use only set designs in period films and avoid real nature as much as possible", in G. de Chirico, *Il meccanismo del pensiero*, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

De Chirico was able to put his ideas about cinema into action in 1952, thanks to his participation as a set designer on Antonio Leonviola's film, *Il ponte dei sospiri* (*The bridge of sighs*). Strangely, it was an experience which he would never repeat. His participation would therefore always be theoretical, as a rather demanding viewer who plays the critic thanks to his superior intelligence and subtle irony.

Back in 1924, in the beautiful text *Vale Lutetia* (*Farewell Lutetia*), de Chirico talked about De Mille's *I dieci comandamenti* (*The ten commandments*) describing it as "an extraordinary metaphysical film... The magic of the colour was much more surprising in that it appeared after long grey and brownish-coloured scenes".⁴ He subsequently talked about cinema in a long interview with Costanzo Costantini and admitted that he had never seen a film by Fellini but that he had appreciated Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* at the Venice film festival in 1958. In another interview, he asserts that "Ford is boring, Fellini is good, Visconti has made some good films".⁵ He had become interested in the Venice film festival in 1954 when he was writing an article entitled *The Nation's interests and the Venice film festival* published in "Il Giornale d'Italia". Apart from fiercely criticising the organisers and participants, accusing both groups of xenomania and an inability to create the right connection between film and audience, de Chirico played the film critic and states very clearly that "the best film was Visconti's *Senso* (*Sense*). The title did not go with the atmosphere of the film as the word 'sense' used in allusion to sensuality does not fit in with the pathetic heroism of our Risorgimento. And now is not the time, after all the humiliation we have suffered and the obsequiousness which hangs over Italy, now is not the time to show an Italian noblewoman acting in this way. Luchino Visconti could have corrected all of this by finishing the film with the protagonist throwing herself into the River Adige followed by the troops entering Verona amongst waving flags and national anthems. But despite his ingenuity and ability, Visconti is a modernist and so he suffers from the phobias that afflict modernists such as the fear of appearing banal, the fear of appearing behind the times, the fear of appearing too enthusiastic, the fear of being accused of looking for easy effects and of using systems that have been overtaken and so on. When he is no longer a modernist and is liberated from all of these fears, he will make films that are even better than *Senso*. However, Visconti's film did have real artistic qualities and merited the best film award". The latter was an opinion shared by many people who participated in the festival, yet Visconti did not win the *Leone d'Oro*. It went instead to Renato Castellani for his *Romeo e Giulietta* (*Romeo and Juliet*).

Giorgio de Chirico understands the great potential of cinema perfectly. We should not forget that he was in Paris before the Great War, precisely when the first medium-length films started to be shown. The moving images in these films began to be used no longer at an experimental level but in order to create stories which were pure *entertainment*. And de Chirico would always consider films in this way: as an instrument of distraction, a *divertissement* of a couple of hours during which time we can forget ourselves and abandon ourselves to the flow of images, lose ourselves amongst the 'ghosts', those 'visions' that played such a great part in his pictorial but principally literary production (from *Hebdomeros* to *Monsieur Dudron*). He would certainly have watched the first surreal-

⁴ G. de Chirico, *Il meccanismo del pensiero*, op. cit., p. 268.

⁵ C. Siniscalco (ed.), *Incontro con Giorgio de Chirico*, La Baitta, Matera-Ferrara 1988, p. 121.

ist films shown at the beginning of the 1920s⁶ with great interest and he would then have followed the development of the filmmaking machine with a certain amount of attention, continuing nevertheless to always prefer theatre.

In conclusion, we can assert that de Chirico's rather rare moments of participation confirm this interest: from the text of 1943 to the set designs for the film *Il ponte dei sospiri*, from his presence at the Venice film festival in 1954 and 1958, to his brief yet competent answers in various interviews in the 1960s and 1970s. It was in one of these interviews that he stated: "cinema is an art which should give great satisfaction due to the infinite possibilities of stage pretence and technical means that it possesses. But it is exactly because of all of this that I believe cinema to be a very difficult art and in a certain sense *mysterious* because of several results that it manages to give, and which seem to overtake the intentions and possibilities of the authors themselves".⁷

"Cinema is a marvellous and dangerous weapon if it is used by a free spirit" (L. Buñuel)

Luis Buñuel was born in Calanda in Spain in 1900. Like de Chirico, he witnessed the whole 20th century and left a cinematographic testament of 33 films made with Spanish, Mexican and French productions. He took part in the Second Surrealist Revolution and distanced himself from Breton when the latter took on tones that were too dictatorial and excessively politicised. He argued with old friends Lorca and Dalí, he fought his own personal war against the dictatorship and fled to America, imposing on himself an exile that would last for the rest of his life. In 1940, he moved to Mexico City with his wife and his first son where he died in 1983. Before starting his career as a *cinéaste*, he dedicated himself to writing, building up, by his own admission, foolish ambitions to be a writer. It is in fact through reading some of his articles on cinema that we find a certain similarity in Buñuel's and de Chirico's views. These similarities were undoubtedly due to them both living the same historical and artistic events, to a life spent travelling, far from their native lands, and to a constant polemic with an artificial and affected art too charmed by quick results and characterised by a lack of talent and above all by laziness and an incapacity to adopt a serious and constant commitment. We also find the concept of the artist-artisan in Luis Buñuel, in his capacity to make a film in a short amount of time without producing shoddy work, in his ability to ingeniously resolve the thousands of problems of a *mise-en-scène*, through experience and practicality, intellectual honesty and constant commitment. As the author of a large number of the screenplays of his most important films (thanks also to Jean-Claude Carrière's invaluable collaboration), from *El ángel exterminador* (*The exterminating angel*) to *Viridiana*, from *Le voie lactée* (*The milky way*) to *Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (*The discreet charm of the bourgeoisie*), Buñuel never forgets the ultimate aim of his work, the creation of a film to be watched, which brings benefits to people, causing them to reflect and to delight, to break down preconceived ideas and to play with the concept of irony and the dou-

⁶ In a note to the text *Discorso sul cinematografo*, Fagiolo in fact underlines that de Chirico saw René Clair's *Entracte* in 1924 during an evening event by the Ballets Suedois during which Casella's *La Giara*, a production in which de Chirico had collaborated, was performed.

⁷ C. Siniscalco (editor), *op. cit.*, p. 120. Italicisation by the author of this paper.

ble values of set attitudes and ways of thinking. He was not very fond of being interviewed, never going into long explanations about his way of thinking nor sharing the numerous interpretations of his films, masking his choices with chance, the necessity of the moment, whim. When he was forced to declare his intellectual position, he did so with a few accurate words, through which we can understand his idea of cinema without fear of misinterpretation.

In a piece published in “Cahiers du cinéma” he states: “I would like to make films that, as well as entertaining the audience, instil in them the absolute certainty that they do not live in the best of possible worlds. Films today, including those that we define as Neo-realist, suggest the opposite aim. How can we hope for an improvement in the audience when everyday cinema tells us, even in the most insipid comedies, that our social institutions, our concepts of Country, Religion, Love, etc may be imperfect but that they are *unique* and *necessary*? The audience’s real opium is conformism and the entire gigantic world of cinema is committed to propagating this comfortable attitude, sometimes hidden behind the insidious mask of art”.⁸ And again, in another interview: “I advocate the kind of cinema that [...] will give me a whole view of reality, expand my knowledge of things and people, and open the marvellous world of the unknown, of all that I can’t find in the daily press or come across on the street”.⁹

As de Chirico underlined, cinema is Image and therefore it must be technically well made, but it is also a ‘story’ so it is necessary to write and dramatisé stories that favour action, that show choices and life in all its complexity in a direct and clear way. Buñuel undoubtedly shared this point of view when he stated that “technical ability is a necessary quality in a film, as in all other works of art – indeed, even in an industrial product. But it mustn’t be thought that this quality determines the merit of a film. There are other qualities in a film that can be more interesting than technical skill. Of course, viewers never bother to analyse the technical means that make a film; most of the time they ask only that the film touch their emotions”.¹⁰ He nevertheless complains about the audience’s laziness and in general about the film industry’s incapacity to produce good films in a way that teaches the audience about high quality cinema, in which all aspects are carefully taken care of and the film’s earnings are not the ultimate goal.

“The cinema audience is the worst of all. A man who goes to watch a football match is excited at the end of it, just as theatregoers talk and argue about a play as they leave the auditorium. A man goes to the cinema because he has a spare couple of hours and doesn’t know what to do or he wants to feel up his girlfriend or who knows what else. I usually go into the cinema hall, however I also like to watch the audience on their way out. I always try to observe them and I notice that everyone leaves the cinema in silence and corpse-like”.¹¹ Just like de Chirico who did not like frequenting intellectual circles in which he said that it is difficult to really say intelligent things and in which, on the contrary, people tend to talk about things that they do not know anything about, Buñuel also tend-

⁸ A. Farassino, *Tutto il cinema di Luis Buñuel*, Baldini & Castoldi, Milan 2000, pp. 94-95.

⁹ L. Buñuel, *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2002, p. 140.

¹⁰ Taken from L. Buñuel, ‘Victor Fleming’s *The Way of All Flesh*’, in L. Buñuel, *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

¹¹ A. Farassino, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

ed to avoid the film world: “I don’t like going to the cinema, but I love cinema as a way of expression. I find that there is nothing better than showing a reality that we cannot touch with our hands everyday... Cinema, for what it is, opens a small window onto the extension of this reality. My aspiration as a cinema viewer is that the film reveals something to me, and this happens relatively rarely... and this is why I hardly ever go to the cinema”.¹²

Quoting Emers and substituting the term ‘novelist’ with ‘film director’, Buñuel declares that the latter “...has acquitted himself honourably of his task when, by means of a faithful rendering of authentic social relations, he has destroyed the conventional view of the nature of those relations, shattering the optimism of the bourgeois world, and has forced the reader to question the permanency of the status quo, even if he does not directly point us to a solution, even if he does not ostensibly take sides”.¹³

On the outside the Spanish director’s artistic journey and life seems very different to de Chirico’s: different nationalities, their life stories unfold in different continents, and different areas of artistic expression. And yet there are many details that link them. Both men lived throughout the 20th century with great energy, creating their own unmistakable style and greatly revolutionising the way of painting and filmmaking. They were both attached to the idea of the artist-artisan, a daily and constant commitment, the never-ending search for self-improvement, for always questioning themselves, within a coherent path in which they always paint or film the same subjects. They both worked a great deal without stopping and concentrated all of their energy on *creating*: Buñuel made 33 films (an average of one film per year), wrote an enormous amount (and unfortunately many of his projects never got off paper), kept frantic work schedules (he would make a film in just a few weeks) and never took a break, just as de Chirico painted thousands of paintings, never stopped studying and experimenting with new painting techniques, always searching for new ways to improve.

Both men were in Paris between 1925 and 1933 and, even though it was in different periods, they both frequented the surrealist group led by Breton, from whom they both subsequently withdrew their support. One important date unites them. In 1929, Buñuel wrote and made his first film *Un chien andalou* (*An Andalusian dog*) with Dalí. The film was shown at Studio 28 the same year it was made and it granted him immediate admission to the surrealist group and signing of the Second Manifesto of Surrealism. That same year de Chirico published his first novel with the publisher Carrefour, *Hebdomeros. Le peintre et son génie chez l’écrivain*, which had a strong surrealist spirit. It is this novel that creates a clear connection between the two geniuses of the 20th century. There is no doubt that the famous scene in Buñuel’s *Un chien andalou* in which an eye is sliced can be considered a close link between the inventor of metaphysics and the great Spanish *cinéaste*. The intention of this image was to underline in a very violent and revolutionary way the necessity of ‘seeing better’, of opening one’s eyes, looking beyond appearances, something which could no longer be put off. Just as de Chirico did in his paintings and he himself underlined in his famous text, *Zeusi l’esploratore* (*Zeus the Explorer*): “The ancient Cretans drew an enormous eye in the middle of stoney

¹² Various authors, *La politica degli autori. Le grandi interviste dei «Cabiers du cinéma»*, Minimum Fax, Rome 2000, pp. 150-151.

¹³ L. Buñuel, *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

profiles on vases, domestic utensils, walls of houses. Even the foetus of a man, of a fish, of a chicken, of a snake, in its early stage of life is all eye. *We must discover the eye in everything*.¹⁴ But what we must underline here is not so much the unquestionable similarity of intentions and ideas, the similar concept of an anti-conformist art or a return to an iconographic comparison of the two artists¹⁵, rather we should analyse a different inspiration which Buñuel drew from de Chirico's writings, and in particular from *Hebdomeros*.

It is primarily the Spanish director who remembers his brief meeting with de Chirico in his memoirs. The meeting took place when part of the surrealist group, amongst whom Gala and Paul Eluard, was with Dalí at Cadaqués shooting *Un chien andalou*. The recollection of this meeting does not go beyond a piece of innocent gossip¹⁶, but the Great Metaphysician's influence was so profound and striking that it was to present itself in many of Buñuel's film in the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, it is worth looking closely at his Mexican film made in 1962, *El ángel exterminador*, in which we find several scenes inspired by the surrealist novel *Hebdomeros*. In fact, it is within the pages of this novel in which "the metaphysical act is translated into *verbo*, into words",¹⁷ that so many themes that were dear to the Spanish director were born, even though he never stated that he had read the novel, let alone used it as a source of inspiration. In this work not only is "hell a puritanical and hypocritical society, the enemy of philosophers... it is the contemporary productivist and political system"¹⁸, but there is above all a deep connection with theatrical pretence: "the wall of the room rises like a curtain and blissful or distressing visions occur. The theatre because de Chirico, even though he has great reservations, nevertheless produced a great deal of theatre (scripts) in this period. But he is also attracted by cinema. The scene changes are pure fading-outs, as they are in films".¹⁹

"The demons of the city showed me the way" (G. de Chirico)

"If the film that you are about to see seems mysterious or incoherent, so is life. Like life, films are repetitive and like life, films are subject to many interpretations. The author declares that he did not want to play with symbols, at least consciously. Perhaps the best explanation of *El ángel exterminador* is that, 'reasonably', there is no explanation".²⁰

Thus begins *El ángel exterminador*, almost as if to prepare the audience for an anti-conformist vision, for a film without a pre-packaged message, inviting the audience to free their imagination in order to allow themselves to be transported both by the images and by the story. Both Buñuel and de

¹⁴ The article appeared in "Valori Plastici", Rome, a. I, nos. 4-5, November 1918, p. 10, re-printed in G. de Chirico, I. Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, Abscondita, Milan 2002, pp. 52-53. Italicisation by the author of this paper.

¹⁵ See the catalogue edited by E. Bruno and E. Bruscolini on the occasion of the retrospective held at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 16 December 1992 - 11 January 1993, entitled *Surrealismo e Metafisica nel cinema di Buñuel*. For a more general view, see also the volume by R. Grisolia, *La metamorfosi dello sguardo. Cinema e pittura nei film di Luis Buñuel*, Biblioteca di Bianco & Nero, Marselles, Venice 2002.

¹⁶ See L. Buñuel, *Dei miei sospiri estremi*, SE, Milan 1991, and also M. Aub, *Buñuel: Il romanzo*, Sellerio, Palermo 1992.

¹⁷ J. de Sanna, *Postfazione*, in G. de Chirico, *Ebdòmero*, Abscondita, Milan 2003, p. 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 127. Shortly before, de Sanna states furthermore that: "The irony of the fiction consigns *Hebdomeros* to fantastical literature, like Jorge Luis Borges and Luis Buñuel".

²⁰ L. Buñuel, *Sette film*, Einaudi, Turin 1974, p. 217.

Chirico developed the theme of enigma and the missing revelation in their works, refusing any sort of banalisation caused by a simple explanation of their choices, and categorically excluding the epithet of 'symbolists'. Like de Chirico who answered critics' and journalists' questions in a provocative manner, maintaining simplistic motivations for his iconographic choices, Luis Buñuel, who was often asked to provide keys to reading his films, always kept a detached and often mocking tone, justifying his choices as the whim of the moment or the simple, practical opportunity to film one frame rather than another: "I cannot understand some people's obsession with giving a rational explanation to images that are often gratuitous. People always want explanations for everything. This is the result of centuries of bourgeois upbringing. And for everything that they don't find an explanation for, they can always turn to God as a last resort. Yet what is the point in that? They will then have to explain God".²¹

In the very early pages of *Hebdomeros*, we find a description that is very similar to the villa in *Calle de la Providencia*, like a general atmosphere of the suspension of time, of a distressing wait in a silence laden with omens. The novel begins with the following sentence "[...] And then began the visit to that strange building located in an austerily respectable but by no means dismal street. [...] They began to climb the stairs, which were very wide and made thoroughly of varnished wood"²²; and "In the corner of the drawing-room stood an enormous grand piano [...]"²³. We then get to undoubtedly the most important description, in which the reference to *Hebdomeros* seems clear: "Then came the apparition of the bear, the frightening, relentless bear that follows you on the stairs and along the corridors, its head lowered, and looking as if its thoughts were elsewhere; the headlong flight through rooms with complicated exits, the leap through the window into empty space (suicide in a dream) [...]"²⁴. The scene in the script is described as follows: "A bear enters the hall of the villa, climbs the stairs on all fours with a grotesque swagger [...]. The bear has climbed the stairs and advances swaying below the large crystal chandelier" and then "the bear moves around the house mysteriously"²⁵. The central idea of *El ángel exterminador* on which the whole plot revolves is that of a group of upper middle-class people who are unable to leave the protagonist's villa at the end of a dinner party. The guests are imprisoned in the drawing room for a long time, attempting to survive their hunger and thirst, dirty and wearing ripped clothes, nerves frayed by their inability to cross the threshold of the room for no apparent reason. The bourgeoisie that Buñuel presents in this film are a class of people with no resources and therefore with no hope, a class that does not possess the practical intelligence that is developed by overcoming daily difficulties and suffering, which would allow them to resolve a problem which seems insurmountable.²⁶ In *Hebdomeros*, the description is even more fitting and we almost feel like we are watching this film in the scene described by de Chirico: "[...] and those characters out of a drama, moving around the

²¹ A. Farassino, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

²² G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁵ L. Buñuel, *Sette film*, *op. cit.*, p. 269 e p. 275.

²⁶ Buñuel himself states that it is about a film about the bourgeois condition, in that "amongst workers it would not be the same thing, a solution to involuntary segregation would most certainly be found... Because the worker is closest to the real difficulties of life", in T. Pérez Turrent and J. de la Colina (editors), *Buñuel secondo Buñuel*, Ubulibri, Milan 1993, p. 158.

piano with cups of coffee in their hands, making the gestures and movements of athletes jumping in slow motion films; all those people lived in a world of their own, a world apart; *they knew nothing about anything*; they had never heard of the war in Transvaal or the disaster in Martinique; they did not recognize you, for they had never met you; nothing could disturb them or have any hold over them [...]. Hebdomeros held that it was the effect of the environment, of the atmosphere, and he knew no way of altering anything about it; the only thing to do was to live and let live. But – that is the question – were they really alive?²⁷

Masonic references are another explicit parallel between the novel and the film: “[...] they recognised one another by imperceptible signs to which they alone possessed the key. ‘Since you are here, you are therefore my brother and my accomplice; *we are in the same situation*’²⁸. The film script reads: “Roc: I’m happy to meet you in a way that it is... brotherly. Christian: Which lodge? Roc: Alba twenty-one. Christian: Sublime column”²⁹.

Apart from these clear references, it is the overall surrealist atmosphere that refers to a certain type of dechirican iconography. As Farassino correctly points out, “the real mystery of the film, *El ángel exterminador*, is the unconscious, the dreams, the voices that come from who knows where, the absurd words, the rooms which seem to get bigger”;³⁰ just like dechirican interiors, with low ceilings and floors with listels, in which mannequins or archaeologists with enormous bodies and tiny legs are wrapped in a profoundly introspective atmosphere in which memories are confused with dreamlike images.³¹ The only escape route from suffocating reality, from the cage that imprisons us, is the dream (which becomes a collective dream in the film) and the imagination which creates new spaces and new perspectives that are less narrow and dark. Like the passing from *Interno metafísico* (*Metaphysical Interior*), enclosed in claustrophobic architectonic structures, to the wide horizon of *Il ritorno del figliol prodigo* (*The Return of the Prodigal Son*). The mind sweeps, shunning the limited and limiting reality, so as to arrive in a non-place without time where it can freely play with itself and its memories and dreams. In the film, the drawing room is set up like a theatre.³² It represents the world of the people who live in it and who are condemned to circle around it without being able to escape, as if they were puppets in a play cleverly devised by a sadistic superior hand which revels in tormenting them. The Buñuelian puppet is very close to the dechirican mannequin (see also the film *Ensayo di un crimen* (*The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*) in the way that human body parts are mixed with mechanical parts, the face is depersonalised and loses any expression, just like the bourgeois man who has been taught not to show his soul or his emotions and to always

²⁷ G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁹ L. Buñuel, *Sette film*, *op. cit.*, p. 230. On page 275 he writes: “What is this cry? It is a cry for Masonic help. Hearing it, every mason is obliged to run to the aid of the mason who has cried out. But here... unless the bear...”; “Christian, the time has come! The unutterable word! ... the bear is moving mysteriously around the house. The unutterable word has had no effect and the two masons are dejected and desperate”.

³⁰ A. Farassino, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

³¹ De Chirico writes in his text *Naissance du mannequin* (*Birth of the Mannequin*) of 1938: “The seated mannequin is destined to inhabit rooms, but corners of rooms mostly; the open air doesn’t suit him... High ceilings don’t suit him: he needs low ones – no vaults and no open air”, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 1-2, translated by M. Newman, Milan, 2002, p. 283.

³² In the script: “At the back of the drawing room is a sort of slightly raised stage which has large drawn curtains at the sides of the front of the stage”, in L. Buñuel, *Sette film*, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

stay serious and composed so as not to break the rules of a proper upbringing that are at the foundation of the false relationships of modern society. As Calvesi in fact underlines: “the poetic non-definition, the non-identity of the mannequin is clear, as the dechirican superman searches the unknown, which actually reflects his identity crisis, and he prophesises only his own powerlessness. From this springs his ‘regression’ towards the subhuman, heroic but besieged by an invincible mystery; from this springs the overturning of the projection in an inverse and anxious path”.³³

The house where Giorgio de Chirico lived for the last thirty years of his life is reminiscent of this scenic setting, with bourgeois furniture and sumptuous features, wooden and gold putti, red curtains in front of the dining room as if almost to create the stage that we find in *Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie*. But theatre is also a place of repetition, in rehearsals and performances, gestures and lines that are repeated, both in *El ángel exterminador* and in general in all of Buñuel’s films in which we often find the same jokes and the same cult actors (Francisco Rabal, Fernando Rey, Muni...). Repetition in de Chirico is almost a leitmotiv of his artistic life, in which he returns to the same subjects (horses, *The Italian Piazzas*, mannequins) and even quotes himself, as if he were something ‘other than himself’. Here we find the theme of the double which they have in common. In fact, if on one hand *Hebdomeros*, the mannequins, the archaeologists, as well as the clearest self-portraits, continually represent de Chirico’s numerous personalities, the male protagonists of most of Buñuel’s films are nothing other than parts of Buñuel himself, each one constructed with certain psychological characteristics, congenital diseases, hidden lunacies and passions. The element of the double allows both artists to create (in a detached way and without a devastating involvement) a negative or positive figure which allows a critical reading from outside, in order to accomplish a sort of regeneration through which it is possible to regenerate the civil and the natural world too.³⁴

Within *Hebdomeros* we find images that are referred to in other films by the Spanish director. In reference to ‘eating’, the painter writes as follows: “he could not understand how sensible people could commit such obscene acts and how they had the courage to do so in public, in front of other people, instead of hiding the shame of their unspeakable actions in the depths of the darkest rooms and double-locking the doors as if to commit rape”.³⁵ In the 1974 film *Le fantôme de la liberté* (*The Phantom of Liberty*), Buñuel subverts reality and shows the actors sitting comfortably on lavatories around a table, talking amicably or leafing through a magazine, whilst the act of eating is seen as something that is shameful, which should not be talked about, and which is shown in an almost animal-like way in a small room at the very back of the house.

And again: “One of them was saying that sometimes he woke up during the night, so he had taken to having a large bowl of milk set out on the bedside table by his maid, when she came to turn back the sheets at night; when he got into bed he took up the bowl, raising it as though to pour a libation, then drank it in one gulp[...]”³⁶, is very reminiscent of the scene in *Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie*

³³ M. Calvesi, *La Metafisica scbiarita. Da de Cbirico a Carrà, da Morandi a Savinio*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1982, p. 94.

³⁴ See J. de Sanna, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

³⁵ G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

in which a young soldier recounts how he killed his father by putting poison in the glass of milk that the man used to drink before going to bed, something he had done everyday for years and which guaranteed him a calm and restorative night's sleep.

There are other films in which we find iconography and atmosphere taken from the *Pictor Optimus*. In *Viridiana* (1961), for example, the scene in which Silvia Pinal puts on Fernando Rey's dead wife's wedding dress is reminiscent of *Il segreto della sposa* (*The bride's secret*) painted by de Chirico for the first time in 1926 and then again in 1971; the little girl with the hoop in *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, 1914, appears in the 1965 film *Simón del desierto* (*Simon of the desert*) in which Silvia Pinal again plays the devil of temptation dressed as an innocent girl to distract Simon the Stylites' thoughts; and again in this film the ending in New York reminds us of the paintings *Visione metafisica di New York* (*A metaphysical vision of New York*) or *Il segreto di Manhattan* (*The secret of Manhattan*). In the 1966 film *Belle de jour* (*Beauty of the day*) we find a reference to the black sun, just as in de Chirico's illustrations for Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (1930), whilst the body-to-body struggle in *Los Olvidados* (*The forgotten ones*) reminds us of *Gladiatori* (*Gladiators*) which de Chirico began to paint in the 1920s.

“À l'écran il n'y a pas de nature morte. Les objets ont des attitudes” (There is no still life on the screen. Objects have attitudes) (A. Bazin)

In de Chirico's paintings we find a dislocation of everyday objects on a sloping floor or within an interior or an *Italian Piazza*, in pairings that in reality would neither be possible, thinkable nor in anyway useful (André Billy talks of a “hypochondriac dislocation” of objects in de Chirico's works).³⁷ Gloves in metaphysical architecture, toys next to mysterious boxes, coloured curtains in front of porticoes which extend towards the horizon. There are objects that recur, such as the set squares and temples on troubadours' chests, the cubes in the *Le muse inquietanti* (*The Disquieting Muses*) or in *Le piazze d'Italia* (*The Italian Piazzas*), and Ferrarese biscuits in *Gli interni metafisici* (*Metaphysical Interiors*). De Chirico himself stated: “But we who know the signs of the metaphysical alphabet know what joys and what pains are shut within a portico, in the corner of a street or in a room, on the surface of a table, between the sides of a box. The limits of these signs make up a sort of moral and aesthetic code of representations for us and moreover we build a new metaphysical psychology of things in painting with clairvoyance”.³⁸ Iconographic repetition is an important aspect in de Chirico's art and returns in Buñuel in a surrealist form, through the dreams, visions, slavishly repeated lines, repeated gestures, and certain particular objects that are found in many of his films. One example is that of the box which is proposed as the mysterious container in *Belle de jour*, as a sensual casket in *Cet obscur objet du désir* (*That Obscure Object of Desire*) and a redeeming instrument in *El ángel exterminador*, or as a musical box in *Ensayo di un crimen*. Or else fetish-

³⁷ A. Billy, *Apollinaire Vivant*, Editions de la Sirène, Paris 1923, p. 42.

³⁸ G. de Chirico, *Sull'arte metafisica*, in G. de Chirico, *Il meccanismo del pensiero*, op. cit., p. 87, reprinted in G. de Chirico, I. Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, edited by J. de Sanna, Abscondita, Milan 2002, in the text *Estetica metafisica*, p. 31-32.

es, prosthetics, projections of oneself, like the false leg in *Tristana*, the hand without a body in *Un chien andalou* and in *El ángel exterminador*, the mannequin in *Ensayo di un crimen*, or the reconstruction of a puppet in *Un chien andalou*, in which “the woman tries to make the man be born again through his clothes and scattered objects: the result is a sort of empty mannequin, a puppet of powerlessness or even another person from whom the man, when he reappears living, is liberated.”³⁹ Not to mention objects which in one film have different functions, passing from the erotic to the macabre with a simplicity and a naturalness that leaves the audience completely disorientated, objects that are apparently ‘innocuous’ that are loaded with mysterious or clearly shocking meanings, such as the skipping rope used by the little girl in *Viridiana*, a rope that will subsequently be used by the protagonist to hang himself and by the blind man to act as a belt for his trousers, captured on film when he commits rape.

“We can conclude that everything has two aspects: one current, which is what we almost always see and what men generally see, the other which is spectral or metaphysical, which only rare individuals can see in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction, just like certain concealed bodies of material which is impenetrable by solar rays and which can only be seen under the power of artificial light such as x-rays”.⁴⁰

Finally it seems important to underline an aspect which technically links the two artists, which is what Buñuel calls *découpage*. In a very significant text entitled *Découpage*, or cinematic segmentation, the Spanish director clarifies this terminology stating that “the intuition of film, its cinematic embryo, comes to life in that process called *découpage*. Segmentation. Creation. Excising one thing to turn it into another. What before was not, now is. The simplest and the most complicated way to reproduce, to create”.⁴¹ Whilst editing is simply a technical procedure and consists of cutting and pasting together a sequence of scenes and therefore creating the movement and the rhythm of the film, *découpage* is the preceding step. *Découpage* is born in the director’s imagination, it is the framing that he will carry out, taken care of in all its aspects, in the lighting, in the photography, just like it is in the script, in the organisation of the space, the objects and the actors. “The image is the active element, a cell of invisible action vis-à-vis the shot, the creative element, the one that can direct the colony”.⁴² According to Buñuel, the decline of cinema was precisely due to the undervaluing of this element and the incapacity to present oneself on the set without having a *découpage* plan to hand. For as much as it might seem a bold comparison, we should compare the importance of this element for the Spanish *cinéaste* with Giorgio de Chirico’s constant call to ‘craft’ which drove him to write a treaty on pictorial technique in which he explains in great detail how to prepare the canvas and the colours, ancient recipes are brought to light, as well as numerous tips on the spreading of the material and drying times.⁴³ The two artists are true artisans who want to learn and carry out their craft like they used to do in old workshops where the master craftsman and his appren-

³⁹ A. Farassino, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

⁴⁰ G. de Chirico, I. Far, *Commedia dell’arte moderna*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁴¹ L. Buñuel, *An Unspeakeable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ See G. de Chirico, *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica*, Libri Scheiwiller, Milan 2001.

tice would work closely together. But times changed and adapting was difficult. De Chirico did not find intelligent ears to listen to him and Buñuel fortunately died before he saw the definitive decline of the film industry.

In 1928 de Chirico wrote: “He looked upon sleep as something sacred and very gentle and he did not allow his peace to be disturbed by anyone or anything. He expressed a similar respect for the children of sleep, namely dreams; that is why he had engraved on his bed an image of Mercury *oneiopump*, that is, the bringer of dreams, for as everyone knows, Mercury was encharged by Jupiter not only with excersising the profession of *psychopump*, he who guides the souls of the dead to the world beyond, but also of bringing dreams to the sleep of the living”.⁴⁴

Buñuel responds: “In the hands of a free spirit, the cinema is a magnificent and dangerous weapon. It is the best instrument through which to express the world of dreams, of emotions, of instinct. The mechanism that produces cinematic images is, among all forms of human expression, that which most closely resembles the mechanism of the human mind in the way it works, or better yet, that which best imitates the workings of the mind during sleep. A film is like an involuntary imitation of a dream. Brunius has observed that the night that gradually falls in the movie theatre is equivalent to the act of closing the eyes. It is then that, on the screen and in the depths of the individual, the incursion into the night of the subconscious begins. As in dreams, images appear and disappear through dissolvers and shadows; time and space become flexible, shrinking and expanding at will; chronological order and relative lengths of time no longer correspond to reality; actions come full circle, whether they take a few minutes or several centuries; movements speed up the delays”.⁴⁵

Translated by Rosamund King

⁴⁴ G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁴⁵ L. Buñuel, *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Buñuel*, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-174.