

## SUPERSTRUCTURE: NEUE SACHLICHKEIT, METAPHYSICAL PAINTING, AND LEFTIST VISIONS OF LABOR IN 1920S WEIMAR

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Two figures stand barefoot on opposite sides of a narrow street, the plunging vectors of which converge upon a distant, central vanishing point [fig. 1]. Clad in red and green cloaks respectively, they seem, at first blush, transposed from some Biblical scene. The long hair and beard of the impassive figure in a red robe at left conjures up a time-traveling Christ, while the figure in green raises a hand to his pained face like some latter-day Adam harried from Eden. This Manichean face-off occurs not in a distant Biblical antiquity, however, but the contemporary moment of the painting's making. Giuseppe Scarlini created the image in 1920 at the height of Italy's Red Biennium: a violent conflagration between left and right which reached the dimensions of civil war in scale and intensity. A pair of institutional entities – and their respective flags – stand here in an embodiment of that conflagration. The local Socialist Party headquarters of some provincial town

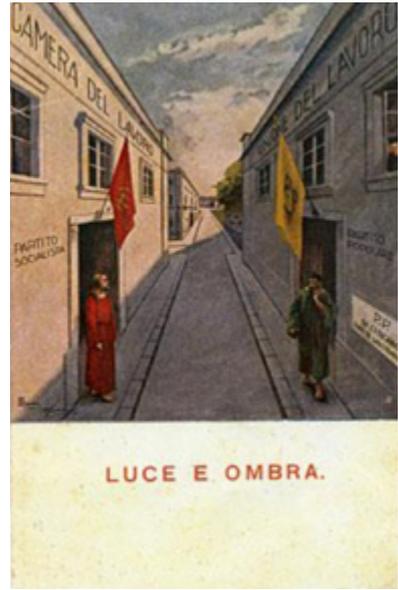


fig. 1 G. Scarlini, *Luce e ombra*, 1920

squares off against the offices of the Christian-democratic oriented Partito Popolare – a party eventually riven by pro- and anti-Fascist elements following the March on Rome. 1919 had seen the Partito Popolare debut to great success, gaining twenty percent of deputies in Italy's new electoral system – bested only by the Socialists.<sup>1</sup> The latter would find themselves increasingly targeted by Mussolini's Blackshirts, with the collective occupation of factories matched by widespread Black-shirt violence against Socialist offices across the country. For Scarlini's purposes, it is the Catholic Partito Popolare which stands in for an unenlightened clericalism and conservatism (with a grumpy bishop or some other cleric leaning out of a window at right, for good measure). Its Socialist rivals appear instead bathed in the eponymous light of the painting's title, on the eve of what seemed like another European revolution.

As striking as the scene's two figures is its spare figuration. Except for the writing across each façade, we find a simplified décor: a few trees, a sliver of lawn, a few clouds. To the extent that

<sup>1</sup> D. Ward, *Piero Gobetti's New World: Antifascism, Liberalism, Writing*, Toronto University Press, Toronto 2010, p. 97.



fig. 2. C. Carrà, *Lot's Daughter*, 1919

contemporary – featuring cranes, trucks, and modern apartment blocks – and ideologically charged [fig. 4]. Set in the simmering working-class quarters of Milan during the Red Biennium, Sironi's depopulated peripheries inflect Metaphysical imagery with a portentously contemporary tension. Painted the year of the March on Rome – after which point Sironi threw his unwavering support behind Mussolini's régime – his 1922 *Urban Landscape* appears shot through with anticipation and foreboding in equal measure. The painting's somewhat drab palette inflects its subject matter with an earthy, weighty quality – hardly the gleaming, industrial dynamo that the Futurists had projected onto Milan. A lone car appears parked in the painting's bottom quadrant, while a tram appears inexplicably to have reached the end of its tracks in an empty lot. The curve of a multi-lane road at left into the distance suggests some potential activity, however, just as the diagonal geometries of the right foreground animate an otherwise static scene. The scene is less unequivocally melancholic than placed in some sort of abeyance: an air of expectation and uncertainty indebted to the temporal and affective ambivalence of de Chirico's paintings.

In the wake of respective post-war revolutions – Fascist and Spartacist, the one triumphant and the other doomed – it was to Metaphysical painting that various Italian and German painters turned during the same years. Consider the resonance between Sironi's *Urban Landscape* and a roughly contemporary painting from Germany: Karl Völker's

the painting recalls the vacated spaces of Trecento or Quattrocento panels, it also brings to mind more recent revivifications of those same traditions. Carlo Carrà's *Lot's Daughters* (1919) [fig. 2], painted one year earlier, suggests one such touchstone, both in its architectural arrangement and the (even more explicit) Biblical allusions of its figures. Equally relevant is the Metaphysical imagery of Giorgio de Chirico – Carrà's erstwhile partner in the short-lived *scuola metafisica*, which had fundamentally reshaped Italian modernism by 1919 [fig. 3]. Scalarini's apportioning of "light and shadow" inevitably conjures up de Chirico's perspectival and scenographic cityscapes, with their divisions of light and shade into crisply delineated quadrants. The former Futurist painter Mario Sironi had already adapted de Chirico's imagery to urban scenes both more plainly



fig. 3. G. de Chirico, *Ariadne*, 1913

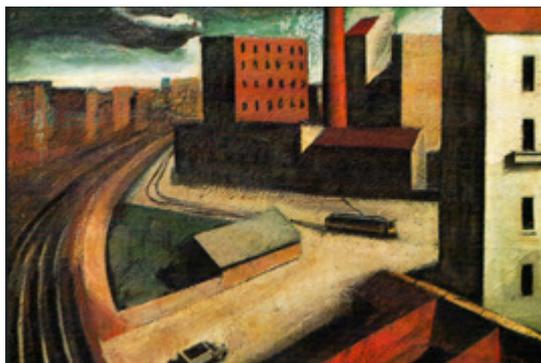


fig. 4. M. Sironi, *Urban Landscape*, 1922

geometries of overpass, tracks, and concrete wall, lent a certain severe nobility by the artist's brush. Having trained in Dresden, Völker joined the ranks of the *Novembergruppe* artists in 1919, an affiliation forged in the political upheaval of Germany's Spartacist Revolution. By 1924 he had joined Berlin's "Red Group," founded by George Grosz, Rudolf Schlichter, John Heartfield, and others, uniting Communist-affiliated artists until 1928.<sup>2</sup> It was this year that Völker began practicing architecture, a vocation already augured in his imagery. As in Sironi's *Urban Landscape*, the absence of human bodies is mitigated in Völker's work by anonymous industrial activity, the sleek dynamism of which is displaced onto the image's crisp, diagonal geometries. The formal and affective proximity of Völker's *Concrete* to Sironi's painting is as striking as the artists' ideological divergence. That is, the artists' respective assimilations of Metaphysical painting are put to very different – nearly inimical – ends, at least in political term. It is, in part, the ideological discrepancies of such formal affinities on which this essay trains its attention.

"[I]t is pointless to believe, like certain deluded and utopian people" – de Chirico writes in his essay "On Metaphysical Art" – "that [art] can redeem and regenerate humanity, or that it can give to humanity a new *feeling* for life, a new *religion*. Humanity is, and will always be, as it has been".<sup>3</sup> Whether despite or because of his professed apoliticism, de Chirico's imagery redirected politicized representational strategies between the World Wars. Scholars have extensively docu-

*Concrete* (1924) [fig. 5]. From beneath an overpass or bridge pitched at an angle to the composition, a pair of train tracks recede into the distance and up the picture plane. Their diagonal thrust is bordered at right by a plain cement wall and parapet, which lead the eye to a single puffing chimney. The painting's subject is hardly monumental. Pictured from the side and from a distance, the factory cedes to the less likely – but far more prominent – ge-



fig. 5 K. Völker, *Concrete*, 1924

<sup>2</sup> S. Michalski, *New Objectivity: Painting, Graphic Art and Photography in Weimar Germany 1919-1933*, trans. Michel Claridge, Taschen, Cologne 2003, p. 219. Interestingly, Völker would go on to work as an architect after 1928, particularly in the field of social housing, though he would continue to participate in leftist artistic efforts including the International Exhibition of Socialist Art in 1930. See also D. Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism: The Art of the Great Disorder, 1918-1924*, Penn State Press, University Park 1999.

<sup>3</sup> G. de Chirico, *On Metaphysical Art*, in *Metaphysical Art*, edited by M. Carra, Thames and Hudson, New York 1971), p. 88.

mented his paradoxical influence in its most visible and prominent instances – namely the Surrealist Revolution in France, and Fascist Italy’s increasingly reactionary urbanism and visual rehearsals thereof.<sup>4</sup> De Chirico’s impact upon the work of Sironi, and his importance for American figuration of the 1920s and 30s have likewise received extensive attention.<sup>5</sup> More fitfully addressed in scholarship is the consequence of Metaphysical aesthetics during the same years for left-wing pictorial experiments in Germany during the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> Why, and to what ideological ends, did leftist artists (and fellow travelers) of the so-called *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) assimilate de Chirico’s architectural imagery, evacuated urbanism, and mannequinized humanity?<sup>7</sup> How do *Neue Sachlichkeit*’s ideological polarities – divided by critical fiat into “right” and “left” wings<sup>8</sup> from its very conception – relate to or exacerbate divergences embedded within Metaphysical aesthetics itself? Did Weimar’s increasingly embattled political culture and economic crisis inflect the reception and assimilation of Metaphysical imagery as the 1920s progressed? I examine such questions vis-à-vis a few instructive examples by left-wing painters affiliated – however loosely and tangentially – with *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

*Neue Sachlichkeit* remains a notoriously slippery phenomenon. It constitutes more of a loose tendency or style than a specific school or movement. Aside from the epicenter of Berlin, its practitioners extended from the Dresden “verists” circle clustered around Otto Dix, to the Munich classicists, to the Cologne Progressivists like Franz Seiwert and Heinrich Hoerle, to other cities from Karlsruhe to Dangast.<sup>9</sup> As Brian Stokoe remarks in a recent essay, “the term *Neue Sachlichkeit*

<sup>4</sup> See, *inter alia*, P. Baldacci, *Betraying the Muse: De Chirico and the Surrealists*, Paolo Baldacci Gallery, Milan/New York 1994; A. H. Merjian, *The Architectonic Afterlives of Giorgio de Chirico*, in *Architecture & Arts 1900-2004: A Century of Creative Projects in Building, Design, Cinema, Painting, Sculpture* Germano Celant, catalogue of the exhibition, edited by G. Celant (Palazzo Ducale, Genoa, 2 October 2004-13 February 2005), Skira, Milan 2005, pp. 31-37; M. Fuller, *The Metafisica Solution: How to Discuss Fascist-Era Architecture Without Controversy*, lecture delivered at Center for Italian Modern Art, New York, 26 April 2019.

<sup>5</sup> On de Chirico and Sironi, see *Sironi metafisico*, edited by S. Tosini Pizzetti, Silvana Editoriale, Milan 2007, and E. Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000; on de Chirico and America, see *Giorgio De Chirico and America*, catalogue of the exhibition, edited by E. Braun (Hunter College of the City University of New York, 10 September-26 October 1996), Hunter College of the City University of New York; U. Allemandi, Turin 1996; R. Rosenblum, *De Chirico’s Long American Shadow*, *Art in America* 84, no. 7 (July 1996), pp. 46-55.

<sup>6</sup> A few notable exceptions include W. Schmied, *De Chirico and the Realism of the Twenties*, in *Giorgio De Chirico*, catalogue of the exhibition, edited by W. Rubin (New York, Museum of Modern Art, 30 March-29 June 1982), MoMA, New York 1982; E. Crispolti, *Grosz and Italy: Indebtedness, Attention, Influence, Circulation (A Research Outline)*, in *George Grosz: Berlin-New York*, edited by R. Jentsch, Skira, Milan 2008; A. Lepik, *Un nuovo Rinascimento per l’arte italiana? «Valori Plastici» e il dialogo artistico Italia-Germania*, in *Valori Plastici. XIII Quadriennale*, catalogue of the exhibition, edited by P. Fossati, P. Rosazza Ferraris, L. Velani, (Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 28 October 1998-18 January 1999), Skira, Milan 1998; and, most recently, M. E. Versari, “*Chiriko wird Akademikprofessor: Expectations, Misunderstandings, and Appropriations of Pittura Metafisica Among the 1920s European Avant-Garde*, in *Metaphysical Masterpieces 1916-1920: Morandi, Sironi, and Carrà*, monographic issue of *Italian Modern Art* no. 4, (July 2020), edited by E. Bernardi, A. D Fiore, C. Caputo, and C Castelliani; see also F. Bosco, *Italienspieler: Italian and German Painting from Metafisica to Magischer Realismus*, in the same issue (<https://www.italianmodernart.org/journal/issues/metaphysical-masterpieces-1916-1920-morandi-sironi-and-carra/>).

<sup>7</sup> Catalyzed by his encounter in 1917 with de Chirico’s imagery in Ferrara, Carrà’s particular Metaphysical painting is informed by a different set of philosophical principals. Among German artists after World War One, however, the two artists’ work was received in tandem and considered a relatively uniform phenomenon.

<sup>8</sup> Coined by Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, the term itself has undergone various inquiries into its precise significance, beginning – in English – with Fritz Schmalenbach’s *The Term Neue Sachlichkeit*, in *«The Art Bulletin»* 22, n. 7 (Sep., 1940), pp. 161-165.

<sup>9</sup> Wieland Schmied notably (and rather inexplicably) classifies even Fernand Léger as a *Neue Sachlichkeit* painter. See Schmied, *De Chirico and the Realism of the Twenties*, cit., p. 109.

keit is (and was) notoriously difficult to define”.<sup>10</sup> Used interchangeably with the related terms (or translations into English) “New Objectivity”, “New Sobriety”, “New Functionality”, and cognates thereof, *Neue Sachlichkeit* served as a lightning rod for Weimar cultural debates at large. In a broad sense, it served to group painting, literature, and photography which evinced a sense of restrained and solemn objectivity in formal terms. To this extent, it was viewed as a corrective to the emotional and formal expressivity of pre-war modernism, particularly Expressionism in its various iterations and offshoots. That corrective served divergent agendas, however. For conservative and classicizing artists, a “sachlich” objectivity served to redress the decadent dissipation of pre-war tendencies including Cubism and Futurism, promising a restoration of cultural certitudes to German intellectual and social life. For the same country’s left-wing avant-garde – most notably the Dada circles in Berlin, Cologne, and elsewhere – aesthetic “objectivity” (particularly as associated with machinery, construction, and engineering) proved first and foremost a foil to pre-war Expressionism. For an emergent swathe of the avant-garde, Expressionist protests against bourgeois existence indulged in the same anguished individualism that it claimed to denounce.

German critics thus squared off over the perceived political valences (or perceived apoliticism) of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, often at the expense of the imagery in its own right. In this sense, the term itself eclipses many of its actual examples. The unruffled surfaces of *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting often formed (and still form) a kind of screen for the projection of respective ideological investments. Consider the poster for the inaugural *Neue Sachlichkeit* exhibition at the Mannheim Kunsthalle in 1925 [fig. 6]. A pair of thin, white blind arches hover disembodied against a black background, like a slice of portico unmoored from some neoclassical façade. The green label bearing the exhibition’s title in the upper right casts a shadow on the structure behind it, attesting to a certain three-dimensional corpulence even as the poster’s rectangular green swatches appear flat and flush with the picture plane. Those floating geometric elements obliquely (and unwittingly) evoke a parallel after-effect of Metaphysical imagery, namely the phenomenon of “painted collage”. A number of artists like Grosz and Hausmann applied *actual* collage to their interpretations of Metaphysical space in the late 1910s. Related to these artists’ celebration of (collective) engineering and construction, the notion of “assembling” pictures from collage and other elements expressly defied the act of painting, and all its associations with individual (bourgeois) genius (John Heartfield, for example, referred to himself as a *Monteur*, or engineer, over and against the vocation of painter



fig. 6 *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Mannheim, 1925

<sup>10</sup> B. Stokoe, *The Landscape Photobook in Germany: From Neue Sachlichkeit to Nazi Sachlichkeit*, in «History of Photography» 42, n. 1 (2018), p. 83.

and its bourgeois redolence). Not coincidentally, de Chirico had been described (and disparaged) by French critics before the war as a kind of “house painter”. That is, his Metaphysical paintings appeared to some critics the result not of aesthetic bravado but of rough-hewn, industrial application: in other words, the absence of individual expressivity, to which German Dadaists lay proud, depersonalized claim.

Upon one dimension of Neue Sachlichkeit’s disparate manifestations, virtually every art historical account appears in agreement: namely, the consequence of de Chirico and Carrà’s Metaphysical imagery to the trajectory of interwar German figuration. In the aftermath of the Great War – and in the wake of avant-garde phenomena like Futurism and Expressionism which seemed to form its anticipation and exacerbation – Metaphysical imagery proved one of the most visible touchstones for an aesthetic return to order: a figuration already purged of formal violence, delineated in solid contours and unbroken geometries. De Chirico and Carrà’s examples spurred a number of related tendencies in the work of a wide range of artists: a return to the (enigmatic) solidity of objects; a renewed affinity for the sureness of line; a penchant for stripped-down architectural representation; a sublimation of collage elements into painting. Their influence transcends iconographic or formal dimensions, however. For it is also the affective ambivalence of urban modernity as it appears in Metaphysical images (particularly de Chirico’s) which rendered them so compelling to German artists grappling with the prospect of wholesale industrialization and attendant social alienation. As we shall see, the suppression of aesthetic individuality and expressivity underwent successive valences in the work of certain leftist artists, which to some degree may be measured vis-à-vis the vicissitudes of leftist politics in 1920s Weimar.

Writing decades ago on the afterlives of de Chirico’s imagery, the art historian Wieland Schmied averred: “Paradoxical works have paradoxical effects”.<sup>11</sup> Schmied was one of the first to detail the impact of de Chirico’s work upon interwar German modernism. “Metaphysical painting,” he writes, “was a necessary precondition for the emergence of Neue Sachlichkeit” – an appraisal which remains entirely valid. Yet I think we might further nuance this problem, not only in the light of Metaphysical painting’s abiding paradoxes, but those attendant upon the phenomenon of Neue Sachlichkeit in de Chirico’s wake. Aspects of Schmied’s analysis hindered some of his conclusions to that end. He refers to de Chirico’s imagery, for example, as “timeless”, as figuring a “timeless loneliness”.<sup>12</sup> The paintings are less timeless than they are untimely, however. Their strangeness derives precisely from the juxtaposition of modern elements (trains, factories, unadorned surfaces) with signifiers of antiquity. Despite persistent notions of Metaphysical aesthetics as a bastion of unreconstructed nostalgia, de Chirico in fact exalted – in both word and image – the “mythical” significance of industrial modernity, whether ports, chimneys, train stations, or factories. It is no coincidence that his *Metaphysical Interior with Large Factory* (1917) counts among those of his

<sup>11</sup> W. Schmied, *De Chirico, Metaphysical Painting and the International Avant-Garde: Twelve Theses*, in *Italian Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture, 1900-1988*, catalogue of the exhibition, edited by E. Braun (London, Royal Academy, 14 January-14 April, 1989), Royal Academy, London; Munich, Prestel 1989.

<sup>12</sup> W. Schmied, *De Chirico and the Realism of the Twenties*, cit., p. 108.

paintings reproduced in German publications following World War One – an image quickly taken up in Raoul Hausmann's collage *Dada Siegt* (1920), for example.<sup>13</sup>

Schmied describes de Chirico's piazzas and interior still lifes as respectively evoking "horror vacui" and "claustrophobia." Yet a close examination of de Chirico's imagery and theoretical writings reveals precisely the opposite valences. His neatly delineated cityscapes resist the void of Romantic imprecision, just as his interiors evince a decided *claustrophilia*, reveling in the sense of travel and adventure conjured up in cramped quarters – a subject that I have treated extensively elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Schmied writes that Neue Sachlichkeit painters invoked the conceit of the Metaphysical mannequin as "faceless members of a servile bourgeoisie".<sup>15</sup> Other painters – and in some cases the very same artists – invoke the featureless mannequin as a *salutary* symbol of depersonalization. Indeed, during the same years that Sironi painted his urban landscapes, the Communist painter and – briefly – Berlin Dadaist, George Grosz, adapted Metaphysical cityscapes to spare architectural scenes bearing disarticulated mannequin-like figures. His work appeared in a Weimar Berlin no less polarized – and riven by factional confrontation and violence – in the Italy of the Red Biennium.

Importantly, Grosz's Metaphysical-influenced figures prove entirely democratic in their depersonalization; they embody, by turns, amputated veterans, decorated generals, and assorted, anonymous members of the bourgeoisie. In 1916 and 1917 Grosz had painted a number of frenzied, incandescent images, their a fractured picture plane informed by Carrà's Futurist paintings (particularly *The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli*, 1911). Teeming with a motley swarm of humanity whose psychic agitation appeared reflected in the geometric shards of Grosz's style, these works (*Metropolis*, *Suicide*, *Explosion*) gave way in 1919 and 1920 to urban scenes evacuated of human presence except in simulacral form. These comparably isolated, even desolate, images are often interpreted in terms of their sense of alienation – a sense that would square with Grosz's committed Marxism, and his concern for the estrangement of man from the objects of his (increasingly industrialized) labor.

Yet the ersatz nature of the human in these scenes also signaled for Grosz something constructive, even potentially positive: a renunciation of individual expression in favor of a re-engineered future. In their 1920 manifesto, *The Laws of Painting* ["Gesetze der Malerei"], Grosz, Hausmann, Heartfield, and Rudolf Schlichter declared: "In Europe painting begins again only with Ingres and finds a new development in de Chirico and Carrà".<sup>16</sup> Invoking Leonardo on perspective as "the rein and rudder of painting," these self-declared anti-artists recognized in Metaphysical painting a means of aesthetic continuity, rather than rupture. Several Communist or Communist-affiliated painters understood the cold exactitude of de Chirico and Carrà's imagery as means of *liberation*

<sup>13</sup> «Das Kunstblatt» 3, n. 10 (Oct. 1919).

<sup>14</sup> See A. H. Merjian, *A Willful Claustrophilia: Giorgio de Chirico's Ferrara Interiors, 1915-1917*, in «The Art Bulletin» 101, n. 2 (June 2019), pp. 54-82.

<sup>15</sup> W. Schmied, *De Chirico, Metaphysical Painting and the International Avant-Garde*, cit., p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> R. Hausmann, G. Grosz, J. Heartfield, and R. Schlichter, *Die Gesetze der Malerei*, manuscript copy dated September 1920; reprinted and published in *Hannah Höch: Eine Lebenscollage, 1919-1920*. Archiv-Edition, vol. 1, n. 2, Berlinische Galerie and Argon, Berlin 1989.

from what they perceived as a fatuous and superannuated bourgeois expressivity. Hausmann, Grosz and Heartfield's descriptions of each other as "engineers" and "constructors" proceeds in this vein suggested by *Pittura Metafisica*. These tropes and tendencies found a wider echo in the contemporary Weimar avant-garde. To wit, the October 1919 issue of Paul Westheim's journal «Das Kunstblatt» hailed de Chirico and Carrà's pursuit of a "correct, austere design suppressing every sign of individuality".<sup>17</sup> Maria Elena Versari writes incisively on this pursuit:

When, in 1920, George Grosz presented his new, *metafisica*-influenced style in an article in «Das Kunstblatt», he justified using this new antipsychological, "realistic" style, in order to make explicit a vision of humanity as a "collective, almost mechanical" concept. Therefore, as in the case of Berlin Dada, the estranged world-building activity suggested by Metaphysical painting offered the opportunity to combine an often overtly political stance within a visual structure that escaped the conceptual constrictions found in what was considered by many to be Expressionism's formal empathy.<sup>18</sup>

In truth, de Chirico's paintings may hardly be said to suppress the individual or the personal, or to skirt the psychological; he staked his entire Metaphysical aesthetic, in fact, upon a notion of the artist as seer, as privileged clairvoyant. Furthermore, despite (or more precisely, because of) the seemingly public dimensions of de Chirico's piazze and streets, the significance of his images are jealously guarded – coded with all manner of recondite symbols and arcane philosophical allusions, premised upon "second sight." The Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean dimensions of this term underscores the specifically German origins of de Chirico's Metaphysical theory, further subtended by his longstanding affinity for the painting of Arnold Böcklin, which he studied closely during his years in Munich from 1906 to 1909. German painters likely knew little of de Chirico's Bavarian formation. The proverbial Germanness of his early work, in any case, is not visible in any iconographic or symbolic sense (aside from a few obvious pastiches of Böcklin's imagery). Rather, it plays out most profoundly in the Nietzschean economy of de Chirico's pictorial space and the proud isolation of incongruous objects. Spurred by Nietzsche's late, ruthless denunciations of Wagnerian aesthetics, de Chirico purged his painting of any lingering Romantic residue: mistiness, imprecision, incompleteness.<sup>19</sup> It is in this sense that, as Versari rightly notes, his work appears to disavow "formal empathy." If he shared little with de Chirico in philosophical terms, Carrà nevertheless found in Metaphysical painting the touchstone for a more solid imagery; in this sense, Carrà's

<sup>17</sup> «Das Kunstblatt» 3, n. 10 (Oct. 1919). The translation cited in Crockett reads somewhat differently, and sheds further nuance on the concept: "extreme verism that strives for a correct, hard drawing, which suppresses all personal traits", D. Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism*, cit., p. 22

<sup>18</sup> M. E. Versari, *Futurist Machine Art, Constructivism and the Modernity of Mechanization*, in *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, edited by G. Berghaus, Brill/Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York 2009, p. 108.

<sup>19</sup> Paolo Baldacci is the first scholar to have offered a nuanced and comprehensive account of de Chirico's gleanings from Nietzschean philosophy, particularly in its late, anti-Wagnerian forms. See, first and foremost, P. Baldacci, *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period, 1888-1919*, trans. Jeffrey Jennings, Bullfinch, New York 1997. See also A. H. Merjian, *Il faut Méditerraniser la peinture: Giorgio de Chirico, Nietzsche, and 'The Obscurity of Light'*, in *Italy in the Mediterranean*, special issue of «California Italian Studies» 1 (2009-2010), pp. 1-26; and *Giorgio de Chirico and the Metaphysical City: Nietzsche, Modernism, Paris*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2014.

imagery appeared as “impersonally” architectonic as de Chirico’s. Both artists’ evacuation of expression and the seemingly affectless and airless atmosphere of their spaces is what recommended them to a post-expressionist turn in German aesthetics. The visibility of de Chirico and Carrà’s work increased in Germany just as the two artists’ tenuous partnership dissolved. If they subsequently followed very different paths, the common ground of de Chirico and Carrà’s Metaphysical painting from 1917-1919 persisted as a blueprint for various experiments beyond Italy’s borders.

Carrà’s Futurist work was already circulated in Germany before the war, through Herwarth Walden’s *Der Sturm* gallery – an eminent point of contact with the Western European avant-garde. The arrival of de Chirico’s imagery in Germany proved more circuitous. His reputation abroad – and more specifically in pre-War Paris – derived in great part from the generous appraisals of the critic and poet Guillaume Apollinaire. Apollinaire notably enjoyed close relations with Walden; an exhibition of de Chirico’s work was even scheduled to take place in the Berlin offices of *Der Sturm*, before the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 prevented its realization. Metaphysical imagery directly entered the cultural bloodstream of the German *Sprachraum* for the first time at the *Galerie Dada* in Zurich in 1917, and the group’s eponymous journal reproduced de Chirico’s *The Evil Genius of a King* (1914). It was, however, the Rome-based journal «Valori Plastici», featuring images and writings by de Chirico, Carrà, Giorgio Morandi and other compatriots, which led to Metaphysical painting’s widespread currency in German artistic circles, particularly by way of Hans Goltz’s *Neue Kunst* bookstore in Munich.<sup>20</sup>

Max Ernst’s precocious and sophisticated interpretation of de Chirico’s work were abetted by his encounter with «Valori Plastici» at Goltz’s. The journal’s reproduction of images in black and white further simplified their formal elements (and more specifically, modernist geometries) for Ernst. The Cologne-based Ernst applied facets of Metaphysical imagery to both painted formats as well as a series of prints titled *Fiat Modes, Pereat Ars* (*Long Live Fashion, Down with Art*) – spare, diagrammatic images which play with perspective and the mannequin figure. By 1919 he had produced a range of images indebted to de Chirico, and would adapt his work to what has since been deemed “painted collage”. Grosz and Heinrich Maria Davringhausen followed suit shortly thereafter in their turn to de Chirico’s work, following their respective encounters with «Valori Plastici». The journal included work various European artists, setting Italian modernism in dialogue with a range of contemporary practices – a fact that surely contributed to its prominence as one of the more influential foreign publications on art between the World Wars in Germany.<sup>21</sup>

German artists had access to reproductions of Metaphysical painting relatively early on. Yet equally importantly, many also saw a large sample of the works in person. Between December 1920

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<sup>20</sup> As Schmied notes, the contents of «Valori Plastici» were further discussed in Paul Westheim’s journal, «Das Kunstblatt» (W. Schmied, “De Chirico, Metaphysical Painting and the International Avant-Garde”, cit., p. 79).

<sup>21</sup> «Valori Plastici» engaged in reciprocal advertisement with the influential Parisian journal «L’Esprit Nouveau». *Valori Plastici*’s influence in Germany was matched by a comparable, if slightly belated, effect in Spain; Salvador Dalí’s familiarity with the journal in Madrid resulted in a number of works in the vein of Metaphysical painting – an influence abetted by the swift translation of Franz Roh’s *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* into Spanish in 1927.

and January 1922, Germany hosted the exhibition of twenty-six paintings by de Chirico, eight paintings and fifteen drawings by Carrà, and nineteen paintings by Morandi.<sup>22</sup> Most significantly, and at the behest of the Trieste-born German critic Theodor Däubler, Broglio mounted a traveling exhibition in 1921 titled *Das Junge Italien* – a survey of «Valori Plastici»'s principal artists which began at Berlin's Nationalgalerie and continued on to venues in Hannover and Dresden. No less than twenty-six works by de Chirico – along with significant contributions by Carrà and Morandi – formed the exhibition's crux. Däubler's essay "Moderner Italiener" in the second issue of «Das Kunstblatt» for 1921 further elucidated the exhibition and the consequence of its artists upon contemporary German art. Däubler maintained close contacts with Italian intellectuals and critics; he had written extensively for «Valori Plastici», in addition to plugging Italian artists in the German press. Since 1916, Däubler also enjoyed a close rapport with Grosz, whose success stemmed in part from the critic's favorable interventions.<sup>23</sup> Däubler's enthusiastic advocacy of Italian modernism – and of Metaphysical painting in particular – surely influenced Grosz's own assimilation of de Chirico and Carrà's work, culminating in dozens of images begun in mid-1920.

Ironically or not, it was in 1921 – around the time of *Das Junge Italien* – that Grosz abandoned what one art historian has called his "metaphysical" intermezzo".<sup>24</sup> The series of paintings and collages that he created from 1919 to 1921 (particularly summer 1920 to winter 1921) nevertheless served as points of reference for a range of figurative artists over the ensuing decade, including many within German itself. To this suite of works belong, among others, the color lithograph *Man*



fig. 7 G. Grosz, *Untitled*, 1919

*is Good* (1919); the watercolor-collages *Tatlinesque Diagram* (1920), *Splendid Times* (1920), *'The Convict' Monteur John Heartfield After Franz Jung's Attempt to Get Him Up on His Feet* (1920), *Diamond Racketeer in Café Kaiserhof* (1920), and *Daum marries her pedantic automaton George in May 1920, John Heartfield is very glad of it* (1920); the watercolor-ink *Berlin C.* (1920), *Handsome Fritz* (1920), *Daibolo Player* (1920), *The New Man* (1920), *Rythmical Regeneration through Boxing and Baseball* (1920), and *Republican Automations* (1920); and the oil paintings *Grey Day* (1921), *Boxer* (1921), and *Untitled* (1920) [fig. 7]. Echoed in similar contemporary experiments by Hausmann, Dix, and others, these works grew out of Grosz's involvement with Berlin Dada, for which Metaphysical painting served as a lightning rod in several instances

<sup>22</sup> A. Lepik, *Un nuovo Rinascimento per l'arte italiana?*, cit., p. 162.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 158-159.

<sup>24</sup> S. Michalski, *New Objectivity*, cit., p. 33.

– instances which bled into *Neue Sachlichkeit* examples both similar and divergent. For Grosz and his colleagues, the “machine art” of Tatlin and the Russian Constructivists formed a piece – however unlikely – with the fundamentally “constructive” dimensions of Metaphysical aesthetics.<sup>25</sup> The seemingly collaged nature of de Chirico’s imagery – evincing a cutting and pasting more redolent of assembling or of “house painting” than fine arts – sealed this affinity.<sup>26</sup>

Yet in the essay *On My New Pictures*, published in «Das Kunstblatt» in November 1920 (the same issue as Däubler’s *Moderner Italiener*), Grosz calls for the elimination of “supernatural” forces from aesthetics, vowing to “sharpen mens’ sight again for a realistic relationship to the environment”.<sup>27</sup> He notably (and rather too emphatically) distances himself from Metaphysical painting,



fig. 8 O. Dix, *Worker*, 1921

especially that of Carrà, “who wishes to be enjoyed metaphysically [but] whose conundrum is bourgeois”.<sup>28</sup> Even still, Grosz’s *Untitled* and other Metaphysical-influenced pictures retain some of the “supernatural” elements which he claimed to have dispensed with. A juxtaposition of *Untitled* with a closely related image by Dix [fig. 8] underscores the comparatively disaffected nature of Grosz’s approach to the human figure – a disaffection not entirely negative, and perhaps as potentially utopian as it is estranged and estranging. If Dix erects the same featureless, antiseptically modern structures in the background of his own image, the worker in its foreground presents a still human (and humanized) pathos.

A more apposite afterlife of Grosz’s quasi-Metaphysical images are the “constructivist” paintings of the Cologne Progressivists, Heinrich Hoerle and especially Franz Seiwert. Seiwert’s stylized, modernist representations reduce the working body to multiple, flattened automata. Sublimating abstraction into an almost decorative figuration, Seiwert renders the figure and surrounding industrial structures (factories, chimneys) almost interchangeable. His particular strain of “proletarian realism”,<sup>29</sup> Sabina Hake argues, does not aim to decry the dehumanization of the modern German worker, so much as reclaim a sense of collective identity precisely through the depersonalized

<sup>25</sup> Dennis Crockett writes: “As contradictory as it might seem today, the evidence at the Dada fair suggests that the Dadaists associated *pittura metafisica* with Constructivism” (D. Crockett, *German Post-Expressionism*, cit., p. 49).

<sup>26</sup> See Maria Elena Versari’s excellent discussion of this matter, which challenges Crockett’s somewhat cursory dismissal of Metaphysical painting as a *theoretical* touchstone for Berlin Dada. As Versari insightfully demonstrates, examining 1920 articles in the journal «Der Ararat», “At the very beginning of 1920, Tatlin and his new ‘art of the machine’ are therefore described as inherently connected to the new Italian Metaphysical art” (M. E. Versari, *Chiriko wird Akademikprofessor*, cit.).

<sup>27</sup> G. Grosz, “Zu meinen neuen Bildern”, in *Das Kunstblatt* 5, 1 (1921), p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> See S. Hake, *The Proletarian Dream: Socialism, Culture, and Emotion in Germany, 1863-1933*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2017.



fig. 9 E. Seiwert, *Two People in Perspective Construction*, 1925

factory production. To be sure, the faceless mannequin in the painting's foreground hardly suggests an unequivocally confident industrial future. In addition to severed limbs which recall the demobbed amputees abounding on Germany's streets after the war, its dehumanized artificiality would have assumed new meaning against the backdrop of fraught economic circumstances as the 1920s progressed. The post-war Communist left invested a great deal of hope in a modernity shaped by technological advance – what the historian Jeffrey Herf has called a “Leninist enthusiasm for capitalist technology”.<sup>32</sup> Marx and Engels, we should recall, believed that revolution would take hold first in an industrially advanced capitalist economy such as Germany's – a belief which the Spartacist uprising following World War One seemed, for a moment, to confirm. That prospect shifted by the end of the 1920s. The industrial upswing of Weimar's relatively stable mid-1920s gave way to a dawning sense of panic and crisis, culminating in the worldwide financial collapse of 1929. In this context, Grosz and Schlichter's automata would have taken on a more politically charged significance, inflected now with a leftist *resistance* to the industrial modernity endorsed by a wide swathe of Neue Sachlichkeit's more progressive wing. If in 1921 Grosz could herald the depersonalization of the human figure as a positive development – stripped of psychological particularity and rendered “a collective, almost mechanical concept”<sup>33</sup> – these valences came to accrue less sanguine meaning on the left. Bertolt Brecht went so far as to satirize Neue Sachlichkeit's unbridled

unity of a new mass society. Seiwert approached the human figure not as an expressive singularity full of pathos – not even the amputated ex-soldiers who appear in several images.<sup>30</sup> Rather, the (male) body forms the self-conscious (at least for Seiwert) “prototype” of a new political consciousness, using the cogs in the proverbial machine as the potential engine of revolution. Though he disavowed Neue Sachlichkeit as a manifestation of “political resignation”,<sup>31</sup> Seiwert and his colleagues plainly drew upon the phenomenon's basic figurative tendency. His representations of space and of the laboring body drew upon Grosz's precedent in equal measure – even as that precedent notably shifted in its political application over the course of the 1920s.

Unlike de Chirico's chimneys, the smokestack of Grosz's *Untitled* belches smoke in evidence of active

<sup>30</sup> Seiwert spoke of his quest for a “realism stripped of all sentiment”, see Hake, *The Proletarian Dream*, cit., p. 212.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 215.

<sup>32</sup> J. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, p. 41.

<sup>33</sup> G. Grosz, “Zu meinen neuen Bildern”, cit.

enthusiasm for industrial structures in 1928.<sup>34</sup> In a similar vein, the Communist journal «AIZ» («Die Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung») denounced in 1931 a “Capitalist Rationalisation” that aimed to replace human labor with mechanized production.<sup>35</sup>

How, in this vein, are we to read Seiwert’s *Two People in a Perspectival Construction* (*Zwei Menschen in perspektivischer Konstruktion*) (1925) [fig. 9] or *Suburban Street* (*Vorstadtstrasse*) (1930)? *Two People* presents an interpretive quandary. Set in an interior at once receding and compressed, the painting hints at a familiarity with both de Chirico and Carrà’s images from Ferrara, in which solitary objects or inanimate figures appear in stripped down interior spaces. The geometric components of Seiwert’s schematic figures appear indistinguishable from their surroundings



fig. 10 G. Grosz, *The Gymnast*, 1921

in certain areas; the torso of the large central figure appears isomorphic with the room’s back panel, for instance. The gray orbs of both figures’ heads echo in a foreshortened cylinder set atop the red brick pedestal (or chimney?) at right. Though far more painterly than Grosz’s images, with thick paint and brushwork visible on its surface, Seiwert’s painting undeniably conjures up those works’ leveling of the human figure to geometric and mechanical forms (particularly salient in Grosz’s *The Gymnast*, of 1921) [fig. 10].

But does this evocation bespeak any sense of redemption (from bourgeois individuality), as it did for Grosz? Or has depersonalization become, by this date, something more portentous, even troubling? *Suburban Street* [fig. 11] recalls de Chirico’s syntheses of perspectival depth and radical flatness, while also suggesting the enduring influence of Grosz’s pictures from a decade earlier. In light of the acute economic crisis plaguing the Republic by this date, can the anonymous congress of these figures be said to express an unambiguously positive “proletarian realism”? Their gathering outside a building (perhaps waiting in line) suggests, in fact, the scourge of unemployment. Unlike the majority of Seiwert’s images, labor plays no role here. Throughout the mid-1920s, Seiwert had produced images of German workers rendered in a radically flat style, with huddled bodies schematized into generic, almost decorative geometries. It thus seems significant that in 1930, at the height of Weimar’s economic woes, Seiwert would reprise the spatial depth of de Chirico’s streets to highlight the isolation of his figures in *Suburban Street*.

<sup>34</sup> R. Stokoe, *The Landscape Photobook in Germany*, cit., p. 85.

<sup>35</sup> R. Heynen, *Degeneration and Revolution: Radical Cultural Politics and the Body in Weimar Germany*, Brill, Leiden 2015. Even Schilchter, who had joined the Communist party and joined briefly in Dada’s adaptations of de Chirico’s work, joined the right-wing Ernst-Jünger-Kreis in 1930, exchanging Marxism for virulent nationalism, before converting in turn to Catholicism. See *The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art*, edited by J. Marter, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, vol. I, p. 9.



fig. 11 F. Seiwert, *Suburban Street*, 1930



fig. 12 H. Hoerle, *Worker*, 1922-23

Both *Suburban Street* and *Two People* bear comparison to his colleague Henrich Hoerle's *Worker* (1922-23) [fig. 12]. Hoerle first encountered de Chirico's work through Ernst (whose *Fiat Modes* lithographs he had helped to publish), and subsequently in an issue of «*Valori Plastici*» which he encountered in Munich.<sup>36</sup> Rising up from behind the gravely wrinkled face of the painting's eponymous laborer, the red brick structure rhymes with various paintings by Seiwert. The empty green lot bounded by a wall on the image's left side likewise anticipates the estrangement of *Suburban Street*, though here the pacing, nondescript figure is deprived even the solidarity of other bodies. Like his contemporary *Female Factory Worker* (*Fabrikarbeiterin*) (1926), the eponymous *Worker* bears a solemn dignity, etched into the furrows of a rumpled brow. Hoerle's *Landschaft* (*Fabriklandschaft*) (c. 1926) [fig. 13] evacuates human presence entirely, revealing even less detailed brick structures and a singular, stylized chimney. Atop a smaller pedestal sits a lone apple, recalling de Chirico's *Metaphysical still lifes* – with stray objects set upon plinths in city squares – while perhaps suggesting the proverbial fruits of industrial labor.<sup>37</sup> Those fruits make a rather meager meal, however. What, furthermore, do we make of these paintings' attendant sense of alienation, whether in terms of their hermetic surfaces or evacuated spaces?<sup>38</sup> How do such elements square with the ideologically emancipating intentions of Seiwert and Hoerle's depersonalized idiom?

To venture some answers by way of conclusion, let us turn to the origins of the terms “*Metaphysical Art*” and “*Neue Sachlichkeit*” themselves. In the retrospective manifesto *We Metaphysicians* (February 1919), de Chirico offers his gloss on the world “*metaphysical*” as it bears upon his imagery:

The two parts of the word ‘*metaphysical*’ can also give rise to another mastodonic misunderstanding: ‘*metafisica*,’ from the Greek *metà ta fysika* (‘*beyond physical things*’) would lead one to

<sup>36</sup> B. Benus, *Figurative Constructivism, Pictorial Statistics, and the Group of Progressive Artists, c. 1920-1939*, PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, 2010, p. 32. See also D. Backes, *Heinrich Hoerle: Leben und Werk, 1895-1936*, Rheinland-Verlag GmbH, Cologne 1981, pp. 24-25, 37-39.

<sup>37</sup> B. Benus, *Figurative Constructivism*, cit., 32.

<sup>38</sup> The Cologne Progressives, Marter writes, assimilated “*de Chirico's sense of alienation*” (*The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art*, cit., vol. I, p. 10).

believe that all that one finds beyond physical things constitutes a kind of nirvanic void. This is pure imbecility if one considers that distance does not exist in space, and that an inexplicable state of ‘X’ can be found as much on the other side of a painted, described or imagined object as on this side, and especially (and this is precisely that which happens in my art) in the object itself.<sup>39</sup>

De Chirico’s figurations of time, space, and surface defy the inscriptions of history. His insistence upon the physical world would thus seem paradoxical, for his approach to physicality proves anything but materialist or dialectical. It is precisely upon such a paradox that the quiddity of his imagery rests. His “Metaphysical” art – and the notion of philosophical revelation attendant upon it – is inextricable from representations of the material world. To put this another way, the sense of enigma in de Chirico’s cityscapes and still lifes hinges precisely upon the displacement of objects: whether things at large in a spare architectural milieu, or architecture as an object of contemplation and revelation in its own right. That de Chirico’s essay *The Return to the Craft* was published the same year as *We Metaphysicians* goes some way in illuminating how his Metaphysical aesthetic could be interpreted as *either* a return or a rupture – a conservative recuperation of tradition or an embrace of modern(ist) senselessness.

Perhaps more significantly – and this seems to have been the case in Weimar Germany – Metaphysical painting could be interpreted as accommodating *both* of these valences, along other ostensible opposites: certitude and ambivalence, automation and dysfunction, physical integrity and intellectual doubt, the objective and the “inexplicable.” Indeed, we find these same valences reconciled in different – even seemingly inimical – strains of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, whether nominally progressive or conservative. The “thing-ness” of this new *Sachlichkeit* entailed at once a return to figurative objectivity and an insistence upon the abiding strangeness, even senselessness, of the material world. The demonstrative warping and psychic angst of Expressionism became sublimated into and beneath the surface of the world: a world now outwardly more taut and tightlipped in its representations, but no less riven by anxieties and contingencies. In this vein, the “new” dimensions of objecthood in interwar German aesthetics comprised the psychological and affective conditions of modernity – conditions which undermined the ostensible plenitude and lucidity of the material (particularly urban) world. The recurrence of the mannequin and factory smokestack in much interwar German figuration attests to the abiding influence of de Chirico’s Metaphysical painting, from Berlin Dada up through the early 1930s. Yet more consequentially than any iconography, de Chirico’s imagery offered a range of German artists a pictorial *method* of conciliation, not only of objects but of affects.



fig. 13 H. Hoerle, *Landschaft (Fabriklandschaft)*, c. 1926

<sup>39</sup> G. de Chirico, *On Metaphysical Art*, cit., p.87.