

HEBDOMEROS (1929) + KIKiT VISUOSONICS (2019): A NOVEL REPOSITIONED BY THE USE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATIONS AND INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

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Hebdomeros + KikiT VisuoSonic is an interdisciplinary video adaptation of Giorgio de Chirico's 1929 novel *Hebdomeros*.¹ The novel is generally cited as a pioneering work of Surrealist literature, even though the Italian painter was never part of the Surrealist movement and often argued against many of its philosophical credos. As both a contentious artist and thinker his paintings had a seminal influence on XX century art and artists, particularly those associated with Surrealism, Neue Sachlichkeit, Pittura Metafisica and Post-Modern painting and architecture. In addition, he also influenced numerous poets, novelist and film directors.² KikiT VisuoSonic, the creative technology that underpins the video-painting, was initially developed to facilitate live immersive performances created via sound-image interaction. These creative practices developed into a purely video context as a result of an invitation to take part in "Giorgio De Chirico "Back To The Future: Neometaphysics and Contemporary Art".

With copyright permission granted by the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico the KikiT VisuoSonic group used interactive sound-image technologies to create a video homage to de Chirico's novel. Real-time sound-image interactivity was used to create the visual sequences (KikiTs) that mirrored the novel's interwoven themes. Each individual interactive sound-image App is referred to as a 'KikiT', which are then joined together to form a live performance or video. From a methodological point of view, combining concepts such as: authorship-agency, co-creation, temporality-spatiality, and interactivity, is at the heart of VisuoSonic's working practices. Authorship-agency in this instance relates to the novel's author and the co-creators Owen and Richards, whose practice-based research processes, within the context of human and computer-based interactivity, are an integral part of KikiT VisuoSonic. The synergetic interactions between the novel and its relationship to de Chirico's pictorial oeuvre became the starting point for this practice-based creation.

Video-Painting

Normally, KikiT VisuoSonic uses real-time sound-image interactivity to create immersive environments in which art gallery, concert hall, theatre and cinema converge into a 'total' performance space (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). In this context, it places emphasis on the immediacy of the perfor-

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYvMXRXXDAQ> (last accessed 9 Oct. 2020)

² See *The Spirits Released: De Chirico and Metaphysical Art*, at http://www.owen-artresearch.uk/custom/artresearch/dechirico/text/spirits_1.html (last accessed 9 Oct. 2020).



fig. 1 On the left, G. de Chirico, *Sun on the Easel*, 1972; on the right, R. Richards & Maurice Owen, *Hebdomeros + KikiT VisuoSonic*, video-painting, 2019

mance, because the sonic element not only shapes the visual dynamic, but is in its turn shaped by its visual creation. In the context of KikiT VisuoSonic, the positive feedback loop takes place in an immersive environment that brings together performance elements drawn from visual art, music, theatre and cinema. Sonic analysis technologies in a software environment enables the establishment of a creative loop between performer

and digital output. This dynamic was challenged by the curators of the Turin exhibition, Lorenzo Canova and Riccardo Passoni, who requested a KikiT VisuoSonic installation in the form of a video that would play for the duration of the exhibition. Initially we viewed this as a limitation on VisuoSonic's capacity to create *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but as we considered the limitations new possibilities presented themselves. The framework that finally emerged drew on the fact that *Hebdomeros* was written by a painter and therefore it would be appropriate to respond to the novel by creating a moving painting that was devoid of sound, even though much of the video's imagery was shaped by sound. Owen supplied the aesthetic parameters in the form of themes and images, informed by his previous knowledge of de Chirico's oeuvre.³ Richards then worked creatively with these parameters to create initial demo KikiTs that addressed specific aesthetic requirements. Owen then tested their capacity to respond to sonic triggers designed to modulate the KikiTs and in so doing has explored and expanded their aesthetic parameters. The sonic triggers that stimulated the KikiT visuals were purposefully excluded in order to reinforce the notion of video-painting, which ran counter to our previous *modus operandi* in which audiences witnessed the live inter-play between musicians or sonic artists and KikiTs in immersive environments. The absence of sound also enabled the video to be exhibited on a plasma screen adjacent to a de Chirico painting, thus reinforcing the notion of a moving painting (fig. 1). This added an enigmatic quality akin to that which imbues *Hebdomeros*, whilst at the same time encouraging visitors to apply a sonic form of eidetic memory.

Hebdomeros

Since the novel's publication in 1929 there have been several reprints and different language additions. We primarily used the 1992 Exact Change English edition because of its association with the acclaimed poet John Ashbery, artist Louise Bourgeois, art historian Robert Goldwater, musician Damon Krukowski and translator and publisher Mark Polizzotti. All the *Hebdomeros* quotes are taken from the Exact Change edition, which also includes several other key texts by de Chirico that shed further light on *Hebdomeros*. The provenance of the English translation in the 1992 edition is itself somewhat of an enigma, befitting de Chirico's oeuvre in general. It first appeared in a 1966

³ <http://www.owen-artresearch.uk/custom/artresearch/dechirico/artresearch/artresearch.html> (last accessed 9 Oct. 2020).

edition produced by The Four Seasons Book Society. The Societies Manhattan address transpired to be untraceable as was James A. Hodgkinson who wrote the Introduction and is acknowledged as the English translator.

From a transpositional perspective, a key factor was de Chirico's inclusion of an ellipsis – (...) – at the beginning of the novel, which became the motif that we used to introduce the video-painting (fig. 2).⁴ This punctuation



fig. 2 "...and then began" (audiovisual KikiT)

device was not the only way in which the author manipulated the novel's temporal flow. He also consistently used long sentences in which semi-colons bookend abrupt spatial and temporal narrative juxtapositions, reminiscent of the way in which film editing abruptly merges time and space. From the outset it was never our intention to produce a page-by-page VisuoSonic version of *Hebdomeros*. The novel's *non sequitur* format is largely void of any sense of a beginning or end, which is emphasised at the outset by the ellipsis at the beginning of the original hand written manuscript (unfortunately several publications omitted to include it). Normally the three or more dots are placed in or after a sentence to indicate an implied missing narrative. We used the concept of the ellipsis in KikiT form to engender a sense of continuum. At first it was constructed as a linear animation with the dots and words pulsating in and out of view, but this approach was rejected because of its literal resemblance to the printed page. This prompted us to place the text in a three-dimensional space in which multiple iterations of "...and then began" were applied to semi-transparent 3D cubes. As the cubes pulsated they displayed the phrase forwards, backwards and upside down, thus creating a text version of a Möbius-like Escheresque staircase. The symbolic effect was akin to a labyrinth made of words and phrases pulsating in space and time out of which emerged the protagonists.

The use of multiple dashes and the small "e" in de Chirico's handwritten Italian translation from the original French clearly indicates a narrative "beginning" in mid-discourse (fig. 3). We will never know what came before because that which follows gives no hint of a "before" and in so doing encourages the reader to be part of a narrative that has no beginning or end, akin to a *dream continuum*. The final pages of the novel contain numerous references to the infinite, "great masses of wild mares, hoofs hard as steel, disappeared in an unbridled gallop, in an avalanche of rumps rubbing together, colliding and pushing towards infinity"⁵ and

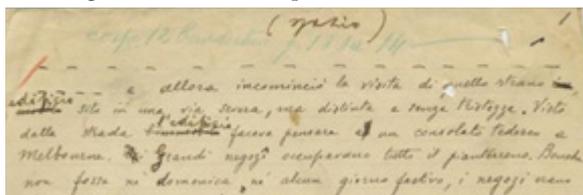


fig. 3 First page of Giorgio de Chirico's Italian manuscript, which he translated from his initial French manuscript

⁴ See J. de Sanna, *Postfazione*, in *Ebdòmero*, Abscondita, Milan 2003, p.121.

⁵ If not specified otherwise, all quotes from *Hebdomeros* are from the Exact Change edition (Cambridge, UK, 1992).

the last page is peppered with ellipses and implied endings that turn into beginnings. The ellipsis at the very outset of the novel not only indicates a non-defined or perpetual continuity, but also immediately evokes a narrative state associated with dreaming. This dream aspect is further emphasised throughout the novel by the various intertwining narratives that imply both a physical and a metaphysical presence. This seemingly irreconcilable dichotomy made the novel extremely appealing to the newly forming Surrealists, both in terms of painting and film. Shortly after the novel's appearance, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí began collaborating on *Un Chien Andalou*, which is generally acclaimed to be the first example of Surrealist cinema.

De Chirico on Theatre and Cinema

De Chirico published essays on both theatre and film and his provocative framing of the two mediums informed VisuoSonic's approach to visualising *Hebdomeros*.⁶ He made a clear distinction between the two mediums. Theatre, for him, had the potential to manifest the greatest metaphysical presence, because he proposed that it had the capacity to transform material reality into an imaginary space that was distinctively more than the sum of its parts. Its continual struggle to overcome its physical limitations, in terms of time, space and embodiment, became its greatest asset, because it required theatre to be inventive. Cinema on the other hand, being a material illusion, was regarded as a spectral medium that quintessentially purveyed 'sentiment'. His ideological preference for theatre over film may well stem from the fact that opera, one of the first mixed media art forms, came into being on Italian soil. And cinema, in the 1940s, was largely dominated by Hollywood and its emphasis on somewhat mechanically produced 'sentimental' dramas.

The animated tableaux (KikiTs) that constitute the video-painting are hopefully devoid of the 'sentimentality' de Chirico was so fearful of. Intentionally, the output is more akin to thematically driven moving paintings, rather than contributing to a developing sentimental narrative. This mirrors the novel in the sense that each element can be experienced in its own right, whilst at the same time connected by enigmatic transitional moments. In a gallery context, the viewer randomly engages and disengages with the 'video-painting' as they move through the gallery space. This is not a disadvantage because the video-painting parallels the book thematically and not sequentially. Even if the gallery viewer were to depart after the "...and then began" sequence, it would serendipitously link the video to the rest of the artworks in the exhibition. Since VisuoSonic is primarily an interactive audiovisual medium, conforming to de Chirico's proposition concerning text to image in cinema was a natural transpositional step. Hence images modulated by sonic triggers became the surrogates for key themes. In this respect, the VisuoSonic approach to the video homage to *Hebdomeros* took de Chirico's film theory at face value: "It is clear that to make a story into a film, you must replace the sequence of words with a sequence of images".⁷

⁶ See A. L. Greeley, *Giorgio de Chirico and Isabella Far "Theater Performance" (1942/45)*, in «California Italian Studies», 6, n. 2 (2016), pp. 1-15; and A. L. Greeley, "Discourse on Cinema" by *Giorgio de Chirico (1943)*, in «Italia», 95, n. 4 (2018), pp. 631-642. Both articles contain the original of Chirico's texts with an introduction and a translation by the editor.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 636.

Themes

The original 1929 French publication included the subtitle: “le peintre et son genie chez l’écrivain” (“the painter and his genius in the writer”). Overtones of self-aggrandisement vanish if one considers the extent to which his pre-1929 paintings influenced XX century art. The subtitle is, in fact, a factual observation and anyone conversant with his early paintings will recognise the extent to which his recurring pictorial themes found expression in *Hebdomeros*. To a certain extent, this enabled us to define the novel’s thematic content in terms of pre-existing imagery associated with themes such as: hero/protagonist; conflict; voyage/quest/Ulysses; rooms and interiors; reawakening-Ariadne; prodigal son; soothsayer/eyes; gods/votive offerings.

Theme: Hero-Protagonists 1

The main protagonist, Hebdomeros, journeys through the novel accompanied by two shadowy acolytes. Their intermittent appearance encourages him to make insightful declarations concerning the world around and beyond them, which he does in a manner pitched somewhere between a Jules Verne adventure and Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, both of whom had a significant impact on the young de Chirico. “I am the only man to have truly understood Nietzsche – all of my work demonstrates this.”⁸ The protagonist/journey/quest KikiT went through a number of iterations before being resolved as a base layer consisting of a video of a man walking on a brightly sunlit Corsican pebbled beach, such that only his shadow on the pebbles was in shot. This was looped so that the movement across the pebbles became a metaphor for the protagonists’ endless journey.

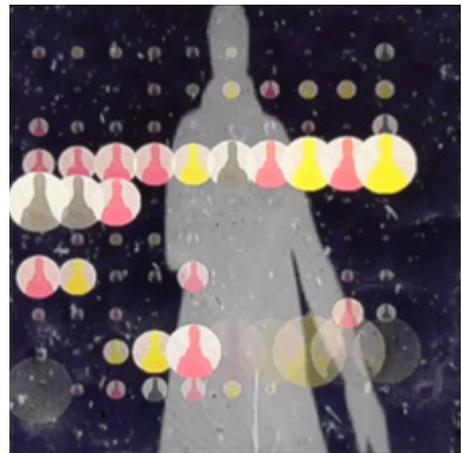


fig. 4 Hero-Protagonist 1: Night (head and shoulder KikiT iteration)

An interactive audiovisual layer was then added to the video’s surface, in the form of a repeated head and shoulders shot of a man, the dimensions of which were reshaped by sound. This had the effect of suggesting the intermittent presence of the acolytes. At times the underlying video was enveloped by the pulsating secondary figuration and at other times the video took precedence. A second temporal layer was added by using the video in its negative form, which evoked a night journey (fig. 4).

A third iteration replaced the head and shoulders shot with an interactive audiovisual layer based on de Chirico’s enigmatic oval-shaped mannequin heads (figs. 5, 6). The Hero/Protagonist KikiTs were reintroduced throughout the video to denote scene relocation and to reinforce the theme of the “endless journey or quest”.

⁸ From a letter dated Florence 26 December 1910, in E. Pontiggia, *Giorgio de Chirico. Lettere 1909-1929*, Silvana Editoriale, Milan 2018, pp. 23-25.



fig. 5 Hero-Protagonist 1: Day (Mannequin head KikiT iteration)



fig. 6 Hero-Protagonist 1: Day (Mannequin head KikiT iteration)

Theme: Hero-Protagonists 2

Despite the mutual antipathy that developed between de Chirico and the Surrealists, we incorporated sequences from *Un Chien Andalou* into the *Hebdomeros* video, because both works feature a protagonist that has a dream-like relationship with the world around him and both use the eye as a pivotal symbolic image.⁹ The Hero-Protagonist 2 KikiT was constructed using short film sequences taken from Buñuel's movie, which were then reframed in parallelogram form. This gave the impression that the film appeared to be floating in a white void; thus adding another intangible dimension to its already surreal and disturbing content.

The appropriated film sequences begin by depicting a man on a balcony staring at the moon prior to sharpening a barber's razor, which is then used to slit a woman's eye (not included in the video) (fig. 7). This was followed by a sequence depicting the main protagonist who is awoken and



fig. 7 L. Buñuel and S. Dalí, *Un Chien Andalou*, 1929 (with KikiT shadow audiovisual overlay)



fig. 8 L. Buñuel and S. Dalí, *Un Chien Andalou*, 1929 (with KikiT shadow audiovisual overlay)

⁹ For more on Giorgio de Chirico's influence on Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, see S. Tusi, *Il fascino discreto della Metafisica: Gli scritti di Giorgio de Chirico nel Cinema di Luis Buñuel*, in «Metafisica», n. 7/8 (2008), pp. 263-279.

beaten by an assailant. This section is looped in order to imply that this is a recurring dream rather than a reality. A third sequence depicts the face of the main protagonist (fig. 8). The interactive audiovisual layer applied to the surface of all three sequences features a variety of semi-transparent shadows that pop in and out of view, partially obscuring each other and the film. Some of the shadows are based on the protagonists in *Un Chien Andalou* and others play on de Chirico's use of shadows cast by the Greek hero Ulysses/Odysseus, as in for example in *Melancholy of a Beautiful Day* (1913), or his subliminal presence, as in *The Seer* (1913-14), all of which he derived from Arnold Böcklin's portrayal of the forlorn figure of Odysseus in *Odysseus and Calypso* (1883). The shadows in the video ambiguously suggest either actual protagonists or their shadows, because they appear to exist in a 3D plane independent of the film. The moon also features in the inserted film sequences, which gives rise to the possibility that the shadows may in fact be moon shadows, which further enriches the scene with lunar references.

Theme: Text KikiT

The Text KikiT is designed to acknowledge that our video homage is initially derived from a text. Using a random process, Richards selected two quotes from the 1992 Peter Owen edition of *Hebdomeros*. Although selected randomly, both texts appeared to highlight important concerns relating to human will and nature: "This was, after all, their milieu, their world...", which suggested a degree of control, whilst, "Human beings find it difficult to free themselves..."¹⁰ appeared to suggest the opposite (fig. 9). The first quote actually refers to fishermen at sea, whereas the second one goes on to point out that it is our inability to free ourselves from prejudice and pettiness that is the cause of our suffering in the world. The two quotes are juxtaposed in the Text KikiT in order to engender notions of "freedom" and the limitations of a "world" that is only part of *the world*, because a *milieu* is defined not only by what it contains, but also by that which is beyond it.



fig. 9 K. Briullov, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1833 (with KikiT text audiovisual overlay)

One of the overriding features of *Hebdomeros* is the way in which descriptions are accompanied by complex associations that invariably, and often imperceptibly, relocate the reader both geographically and mentally. Having pondered on the meta-associations attached to the two quotes, their combined sense of nihilism prompted us to use Karl Briullov's huge megalomaniacal painting *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1833) as the base layer and coding was then used to make the text randomly appear on the surface of the painting, whilst sound triggers caused the text to change font

¹⁰ G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, trans. M. Cronsland, Peter Owen Ltd., London 1992, on pp. 67 and 98.



fig. 10 K. Briullov, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1833 (with KikiT text audiovisual overlay)

sizes and colour.¹¹ In the end, the painting became completely obscured by the text overlay. However, for the video-painting, we required the opposite and therefore we reversed the video footage so that as Briullov's painting becomes increasingly intelligible, its visual content injects further meaning onto the text (fig. 10).

Theme: Journey – Quest 1 (Bellerophon, Pegasus, and the Fiat 1400)

In 1950, de Chirico was commissioned by the Fiat motorcar company to create an advertising poster for their 1400 model. The poster was initially produced as a painting, which was then reproduced in poster format. Since the novel is predicated on a quest-like journey in which the protagonists, led by Hebdomeros, travel through seemingly real landscapes that merge into each other in a dream-like way, we appropriated his composition and developed it as a metaphor for the journey/quest. The poster's composition features the Greek hero Bellerophon holding the reins of the winged horse Pegasus. Bellerophon, whilst looking at Pegasus, points purposefully at the new Fiat 1400 below them. Hovering above them amongst evangelical clouds is a vintage Fiat model. The symbolism is obvious since Bellerophon appears to be saying: "That is the future of motoring". It became KikiTised by first re-framing the image to fit the 16:4 video screen format and then adding an additional 3D interactive audiovisual layer (fig. 11).



fig. 11 Bellerophon, Pegasus and the Fiat 1400 (with 3D KikiT audiovisual overlay)

This KikiT uses the same basic code as the "...and then began" KikiT; with the wrap-around text replaced by found footage of vintage Italian cars speeding along a highway. This inclusion changes a simple representation of a car advertisement into a scene bustling with car-related energy. The effect is kaleidoscopic, as multiple iterations of the same car pulse across the screen, at times joining up to form a "car snake". Some of the cubes expand in response to sound and then stand there at an oblique angle to the poster like ethereal tower blocks lit by the pulsating movement of the cars speeding across their surface. This KikiT draws on the 3D multi-visual nature of Cubism and the raw untamed collective energy associated with Italian Futurism.

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¹¹ For more on Karl Briullov's painting, see <http://www.owenartresearch.uk/custom/rwpainting/ch1/ch1.5.html> (last accessed 9 Oct. 2020).

Theme: Journey – Quest 2 (Day and Night)

This KikiT is a variation of the KikiT based on the Fiat 1400 poster. It uses the same 3D KikiT code but with the cars being a much more prominent feature. An ambiguous temporal dimension was added by alternating the speeding cars with images of car head and taillights seen at night. The combined effect of this transition, plus the movement of the cars across the surface of the cubes created a disorientating effect and a sense of an endless journey. The head and taillights of the cars project numerous dots on the surface of the cubes making them appear like tumbling gaming dice (fig. 12). The shift from day to night engendered a sense of disorientation as cars that are identifiable in the daytime sequences disappear into shadows in the nighttime sequences. There is no point of rest. There is a rush to get somewhere, without ever arriving. The



fig. 12 Journey – Quest 2: Day and Night (with 3D KikiT audiovisual overlay)



fig. 13 Journey – Quest 2: Day (with 3D KikiT audiovisual overlay)

cars constantly return to the same place from which they repeatedly hurtle away from (fig. 13). An important aspect of de Chirico's fascination with Nietzschean philosophy focused on his concept of "eternal recurrence", which pervades much of the painter's imagery and writing. He created numerous paintings entitled *Return of the Prodigal Son*, and *Hebdomeros* contains several obliquely references to the eternal moment in time: "...they knew neither dawn nor dusk, only eternal noon" (p.38), and "Where are you bound for, you of the coat with the astrakhan collar? You who are the prototype of the eternal traveler..." (p. 48).

Theme: Journey – Quest 3 (Ulysses in a room)

Ulysses is the defining example of the determined voyager and a recurring motif throughout de Chirico's pictorial oeuvre (fig. 14). In *Hebdomeros*, de Chirico refers to him by his Latin name Ulysses (Odysseus in Greek), when he obliquely suggests parallels between the toughness of Ulysses' bow string and the steel strings of a piano into which has fallen a flaming candelabra; and additionally when he refers to Ulysses' dog, which was faithful until death.¹² Although a somewhat subliminal figure in the novel, he pervades much of its atmosphere concerning a sense of an underlying quest, and *Hebdomeros*, like Ulysses, attains a form of resolution when, on the last page, he is

¹² See *ibidem*, pp. 4 and 108.



fig. 14 Journey – Quest 3: *The Return of Ulysses* (with KikiT audiovisual aqueous overlay)

surfaces of which are added interactive audiovisual layers resembling foaming waves. The pictorial transitions give the impression that Ulysses is rowing on a choppy sea within the confines of a room. In addition to waves the sound activated membranes suggests a coral-like graphic that implies an additional aqueous atmosphere.

Theme: Interiors – Rooms

A distinct feature of de Chirico's so called Metaphysical period was a group of paintings that focused on interiors containing technical drawing paraphernalia, such as set squares and T-squares as well as culinary motifs and maps. One such example is *Metaphysical Interior with Biscuits* (1916). In later years, these gave way to rooms in which numerous gladiators battled for superiority, or rooms that framed other challenging forms of figuration, such as the previously cited Ulysses rowing across a sea topped carpet. The theme of the 'interior' as a place of reverie and disturbing visions underlies several passages in *Hebdomeros*.

Hebdomeros listened to him politely; he would have liked to tell him he hated panoramas, that he liked nothing but rooms, good rooms where one could shut oneself up, with the curtains drawn and the doors closed; and especially the corners of rooms and low ceilings; but he didn't say a word about all the things he preferred, afraid he wouldn't be understood, and even more afraid that people would think him mad and report him to the local medical authorities (pp. 25-26).

Interior space, as a place conducive to sudden and unaccountable visions, was realised in KikiT terms by first filming sections of de Chirico's painting *Warrior Mannequins (Two Archaeologists)* (1926) (fig.15). The interior space in the painting was emphasised by vertical and diagonal tracking shots that did not reach the edge of the painting. An interactive audiovisual layer made up of vortex-like linear cones was added to the video's surface. Like temporary apparitions, these dynamically pulsating shapes rotate around a moving central axis and in so doing concealed and reveal the room's interior.

¹³ Both paintings are titled *The Return of Ulysses* (1968 and 1973). The drawing was a study for the latter painting.

Theme: Soothsayer – Eyes – Seer

Sight and insightfulness beyond the physical act of seeing are recurring motifs in both the novel and many of de Chirico's paintings, for example *The Seer* (1914-15), *The Jewish Angel* (1916). His novel contains numerous references to eyes, some of which are purely descriptive and designed to enrich our perception of the various characters that seamlessly float in and out

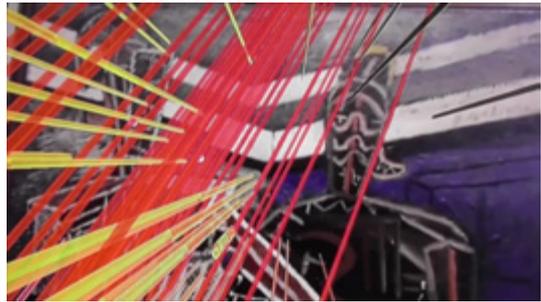


fig. 15 G. de Chirico, *Warrior Mannequins (Two Archaeologists)* 1926 (with KikiT audiovisual vortex overlay)

of Hebdomeros's consciousness; figures such as gladiators, Etruscan statuary, centaurs, royalty, young children, women and old men. Many of the eye references are also connected to Hebdomeros's own emotional frame of mind and the most telling is located at the end of the novel. It relates to the moment Hebdomeros realises that the woman who describes herself as 'Immortality', "...has the eyes of his father; and he understood" (p.117).¹⁴

The eyes KikiT uses a 3D patch that enables objects to pulse towards the viewer like a "star field". And here the entire quote is relevant:

Suddenly Hebdomeros saw that this woman had the eyes of his father; and he *understood*. She spoke of immortality in the great starless night.

... "O Hebdomeros", she said, "I am Immortality. Nouns have their gender, or rather their sex, as you once said with much finesse, and the verbs, alas, decline. Have you ever thought of my death? Have you ever thought of the death of my death? Have you *thought of my life?* One day, o brother..." (*ibidem*, emphasis in the original).¹⁵

In order to evoke the immensity of the firmament, we initially made 50,000 eyes per second pulse out from a central galactic point, thus creating a kind of massive cosmic storm of eyes. The overall effect was impressive, but the sheer number of eyes resulted in a loss of definition that downplayed any sense of revelation, intrigue or even menace. Much debate followed concerning 'eye' quantity, constitution, generation and decay rates and the param-

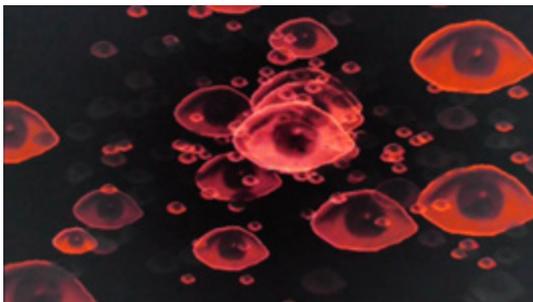


fig. 16 Eye KikiT

¹⁴ This telling motif was used as the dust jacket image on the Peter Owen English translation of *Hebdomeros*, published in 1964.

¹⁵ For more on the theory that that much of the artist's oeuvre was underpinned by a cathartic desire to *re-member* his father who died when de Chirico was 17 years of age, see: http://www.owen-artresearch.uk/custom/artresearch/dechirico/gender_txt/gender_1.html (last accessed 9 October 2020).

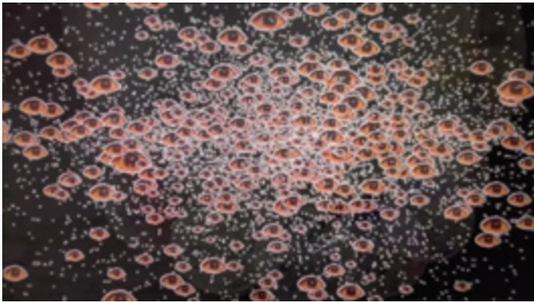


fig. 17 Eye KikiT

viewer as though heading to cosmic oblivion (fig.17).

Theme: WAR – Centaurs and Roman Charioteers

Throughout the book, conflict is played out in various modern and ancient forms both human and mythic, quite often focusing on archetypes such as gladiators, roman legionnaires and centaurs; all of whom were recurring themes in many of de Chirico's paintings. Our KikiTisation of this theme involved a 3D patch that generated 16 slowly rotating semi-transparent 3D orbs. As the orbs rotated they expanded and contracted and in so doing evoked planetary motion.



fig. 18 Centaurs iteration incorporating G. de Chirico's *The Fighting Centaurs*, 1909



fig. 19 Roman Charioteers iteration incorporating G. de Chirico's *The Invincible*, 1969

eters in which they would react to sound (fig.16). The concept of 'decay rate' provided the solution because it allowed us to generate an initial cosmic-like explosion of eyes and then temper their intensity by using a sonic input to produce and reduce their 'life and trajectory'. As the eyes proceeded towards the viewer, they increased in size and definition, some appeared to pop or burst and others drifted past the

The surface of the 'planets' was defined by a de Chirico painting and a print depicting centaurs and Roman charioteers, thus inferring the presence of the Roman god of war and the planet Mars.¹⁶ The paintings were placed in a database and then randomly integrated into the semi-transparent orbs (fig.18). The semi-transparency allowed the imported paintings to overlap and merge and in so doing created intense painterly washes that appeared like nebulae or cosmic gases and at the same time the intermittent presence of charioteer- and centaur-themed paintings engendered a sense of conflict (fig.19). Although viewed in

¹⁶ *The Fighting Centaurs* (1909) (oil painting), and *The Invincible Chariot* (1969) (lithographic print) were used as the base layers for the War: Centaurs and Roman Charioteers' KikiT.

the gallery on a plasma screen approximately the same size as the adjacent de Chirico painting, it still managed to engender a sense of cosmic vastness and wonderment.

Theme: Votive

References to food that is real, metonymic or votive consistently appear in de Chirico's paintings and in *Hebdomeros*. In the following quote food is given an ethical dimension: "He [Hebdomeros, scil.] divided dishes into two categories: moral and immoral. He was utterly disgusted by the sight of certain restaurants where gourmets go to satisfy the obscene desires of their gastrointestinal apparatus, and his soul was filled with a righteous and holy indignation" (pp. 59-60).



fig. 20 Mercurial Votive incorporating G. de Chirico's *Hermetic Melancholia*, 1918-19

His pictorial oeuvre also contains numerous references to the "symbolic" nature of food. Sometimes these appear crudely sexual as in, for example, *The Uncertainty of the Poet* (1913), and *The Philosopher's Conquest* (1913-14), both of which contain phallic symbolism via the juxtaposition of a Greek torso and a bunch of ripe bananas and a cannon and two artichokes. However, from our perspective we found his juxtaposition of food and deity of greater interest. In this context food signifies a votive act, a gift designed to encourage the god or hero to emerge from the deep space of the painting, usually in the form of classical busts of gods such as Apollo or Mercury. For the Votive KikiT we combined Mercury's head from de Chirico's *Hermetic Melancholia* (1918-19), and various food motifs taken from a range of other paintings (fig. 20).

The food offerings, in the form of biscuits, cakes, artichokes and bananas, in addition to other objects, were triggered into view by a sonic input, and their size, placement and duration was designed in such a way as to encourage the feeling that if a votive offering was not accepted, it would disappear in order to reappear and elicit a response. Experiments were conducted with regard to the colour of the void out of which the deity might emerge. Initially black was used but was found to be too claustrophobic. White, on the other hand, provided a more nebulous space in which the votive offerings appeared to float in an ethereal void, out of which the deity slowly faded into view. The eventual appearance of the deity in the form a classical bust engendered a sense of gravitas and resolution.

Theme: Reawakening – Ariadne

Ariadne as such is not referred to by name in *Hebdomeros*, but her persona as the quintessential symbol of awakening via the dream state is a recurring them in the novel: "He looked upon sleep as something sacred and very gentle and he did not allow his peace to be disturbed by anyone or

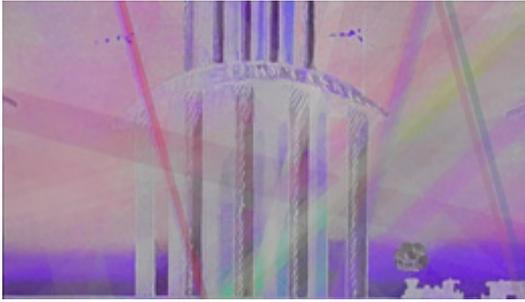


fig. 21. Tholos iteration incorporating G. de Chirico's *Piazza d'Italia*, 1913

example and was used as the basis for the Ariadne KikiT. The KikiT begins by cross-fading between the lower and upper section of the painting. The lower section contains a statue depicting the sleeping Ariadne and two male figures shaking hands as if greeting or departing. The upper section depicts a wall and a *tholos* (circular colonnaded mausoleum), across which passes a steam train (fig. 21). The cross-fade begins with the image of the tholos (in colour negative form) and then transitions to the Ariadne section. The steam train is animated so as to appear as if traversing the painting. The sound-image interactive layer consists of semi-transparent coloured stripes that criss-cross and change colour like rays of light. The combined effect is a rich mixture of different forms of animation: i.e., transitions, cell animation and interactive audiovisuals. Ariadne's mysterious presence was further highlighted by transitioning the painting between colour and monochrome, which caused the white statue that personified her to take on an ethereal permanence, whilst all around her changed (fig. 22). The KikiT created for this sequence was one of, if not *the* most, complex KikiT produced for this commission. Much discussion took place concerning the length of time for each of the separate elements and the duration between each element. The sequences were achieved by coding in the animations so that they performed correctly behind the interactive audiovisual layer. In this regard, everything happens in one frame and each of the cells relating to the animation of the train are successively brought in by timed code rather than over a time-based succession of frames. This was achieved by employing a list of effects that were worked through in order and at times held in a further list, with instructions such as: do the transition between scenes after a defined amount of seconds, then animate the train to successively across the scene with each cell lasting a part of a second.



fig. 22 Ariadne iteration incorporating G. de Chirico's *Piazza d'Italia*, 1913

Theme: Knight Errant

The appearance of the archetypal chivalrous horseman, the Knight Errant, was a trope designed to encapsulate many different passages in the novel in which Hebdomeros is engaged in compassionate proselytizing. De Chirico's painting *Return to the Castle* (1969) was used as the base layer on which sound sensitive maze-like lines sporadically rearranged themselves. The lines were also akin to neurological brain patterns that echoed the serrated outline of the Knight Errant. The lines were rotated by 45° and 90° in response to audio input and consequently joined up or separated depending on their orientation (fig. 23). At first these lines seem to be spinning around in a predominately black environment, but as a zoom out occurs it reveals the knight on horseback crossing a bridge in order to reach the castle beyond the Castle moat (fig. 24).



fig. 23 Knight Errant, (close-up) based on Giorgio de Chirico's *Return to the Castle*, 1969, (with maze-like audiovisual overlay)



fig. 24 Knight Errant, based on Giorgio de Chirico's *Return to the Castle*, 1969, (with maze-like audiovisual overlay)

Conclusion

As both a video-painting and a homage, Hebdomeros+KikiT VisuoSonics fulfilled its initial objective, but as the ellipsis at the core of its dynamic suggests, it awaits the inclusion of further material generated by expanding on yet unexplored parallels between *Hebdomeros* and “le peintre et son genie chez l'écrivain”. *The Return of the Prodigal Son* is one such example. This recurring theme first appeared in pictorial form in the eponymous 1922 painting.¹⁷ In common with later versions it depicts a statue-like XIX century frock-coated gentleman embracing his son, the evocation of modernity, who is portrayed as a mannequin constructed out of technical drawing instruments with an egg-like oval head. His appearance in the novel is tinged with melancholy, since it is accompanied by a sense of arriving too late for reconciliation or celebration:

“Three cheers for the one who has come back! Three cheers for the wanderer's return! Three cheers for the prodigal son!” These shouts and cheers spread from house to house [...] In the

¹⁷ See L. Canova, *The Arrival of the Revenants. Giorgio de Chirico and Neometaphysical Art at the Frontiers of Time*, in «Metaphysical Art», n. 14-16 (2016), p. 299.

middle of the eucalyptus park the father's house maintained a stubborn silence behind its closed shutters, and as if in sympathy everything else gradually fell silent too (p.76).

As pointed out earlier, it was not our original intention to produce a homage using a video format. However, having done so in response to a curatorial request, we acquired new insights into *VisuoSonics'* potential vis-à-vis being a video creation tool. On several previous occasions we incorporated video into KikiTs in order to establish narrative elements onto which were layered further images and texts via sound sensitive membranes, but this was always used in a live immersive context. And, unlike the somewhat locked-down nature of video, the conjunction of video and live KikiT enabled the spatio-temporal on screen to merge with live sound triggers off screen. The conjoining of on screen and off screen is an exciting prospect that opens up many interesting conceptual possibilities, especially in the context of *Hebdomeros*. However, to pursue this avenue we would have to revisit our original intention and work in a live immersive context. The Turin video made a virtue of being like a silent bi-dimensional moving painting. Conversely, de Chirico's novel *Hebdomeros* and his paintings are significantly tridimensional and this now prompts us to shift our homage into an immersive 3D context. The novel's spatial quality is largely a result of the way in which the author/painter imaginatively combines factual and poetic descriptions that encourage us to continuously experience the world by means of all our senses. This brief, but typical, passage evokes tactile, olfactory, acoustic and visual triggers:

...as they lay in their hotel rooms on sheets made hot by the midsummer heat, in a stifling atmosphere that stank of dirty toilets and linoleum; through the open window came the sound of the waves as they broke at regular intervals on the shore, somewhere out there in the darkness (p. 10).

Another way in which the novels spatial atmosphere is enhanced is via the use of acoustic geography, in which sound is used to define space and place:

Just as Hebdomeros said these last words a burst of cannon fire echoed round the harbor; [...] instinctively everyone pulled out his watch, thinking it was noon, but Hebdomeros put out a restraining hand; "We have not yet reached the middle of the day; the cannon shot you have just heard does not mean that the sun in space, the hands on the clock and the shadows on the sundials have reached that fateful point which some say indicates the hour of ghosts far more interesting and complicated than those which ordinarily appear before us at the stroke of midnight in deserted graveyards or in the lonely ruins" (p. 74).

In terms of sensory and geographic readings of *Hebdomeros*, there are a number of ways, other than thematic variations, in which our practice-based approach to authorship and agency in the

context of *Hebdomeros* might further develop beyond the confines of a video installation located in a gallery. Numerous performance/installation prospects present themselves vis-à-vis immersive experiences located somewhere between theatre and cinema, with performative elements controlled by actors or musicians who provide the acoustic or sonic triggers that modulate the KikiTs in real-time. Developments such as these would enable the viewer to experience the novel physically as well as conceptually. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* space, as a stage-less stage, blurs the distinction between viewer and performer, encouraging the viewer to become a protagonist akin to performers who are both viewers and active agents (since they have the means to reshape the KikiTs). This is by no means a new idea and was first muted by Bruno Corra when he proposed the concept of Abstract Cinema-Chromatic Music as early as 1912.¹⁸ One of our previous projects, entitled *Extended Bunraku*, explored similar concepts in the context of the relationship between puppeteer and puppet in Japanese Bunraku Theatre. The quasi-invisible hooded puppeteer in Bunraku acted as the data-projectionist, whilst the actor puppet provided the movable projection surface. Micro data-projectors not only make this form of intimate relationship between projection source and receiver/protagonist possible, but also open up new creative possibilities. Multi-dimensional staging would enable an expanded exploration of de Chirico's life long trope concerning human presence in Metaphysical landscapes, as narrated in *Hebdomeros* via continuous references to the world experienced through the five senses.

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¹⁸ See R. Bassan, *Cinema and Abstraction: From Bruno Corra to Hugo Verlinde*, in «Senses of Cinema», n. 61 (Dec. 2001), online at <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/cinema-and-abstraction-from-bruno-corra-to-hugo-verlinde/> (last accessed 9 Oct. 2020).