

AU-DELÀ DU POSTMODERNISME? NIETZSCHE/CHIRICO

For what I have to do is terrible, in any sense of the word; I do not challenge individuals — I am challenging humanity as a whole with my accusation: whichever way the decision may go, *for me or against me*, in any case there attaches to my name a quantity of doom that is beyond telling.

F. Nietzsche. *Selected Letters*

The Italian surrealist, Giorgio de Chirico, is the painter of postmodernism *par excellence*. Chirico's world begins just at that point where the grand récits of modernity disappear into their own perspectival simulation; and where power, operating under the sign of seduction, is like a black hole in the social nebula which sucks into its dense vortex the energies of living labour and embodied politics. Here, there is, in fact, no perspectival space from which spreads out the figurations of the real. Chirico is the artist of nihilism just because he (like an uncanny precursor of René Magritte and Max Ernst, and also of Foucault's semiology of *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) understood the full consequences of Nietzsche's accusation that in a world in which conditions of existence are transposed into "predicates of being" it would be the human fate to live through a fantastic inversion and cancellation of the order of the real. Commodity into sign, history into semiurgy, concrete labour into abstract exchange, perspective into simulation: these mark the threshold of Chirico's artistic imagination as it dwells on the eclipse of history symbolized by Nietzsche's madness in the piazzas of Turin.

There is one painting, in particular, by Chirico which provides a privileged glimpse into the inner locus of the Nietzschean world and which, for that reason, represents a great rupture in western consciousness: making nihilism the limit and possibility of *historical* emancipation. Titled simply, *Landscape Painter*, this production is a brilliant satire on the representational theory of nature (the landscape coded, and thus imprisoned, on the canvas), and a fully tragic portrayal of (our) imprisonment in a dead empire of signs. Chirico is a vivisectionist of the "referential illusion" at work in modern experience to this extent: his paintings demonstrate with an uncompromising sense of critical vision the rupture in western experience occasioned by the sudden disappearance of the classical conceptions of power, truth, history, and nature as referential finalities, and by the metamorphosis of society into a geometry of signs. *Landscape Painter* exists just at that edge in the identitarian logic of western experience where nature (represented by the dead image-system of the pastoral landscape) passes over into its opposite: the geometric and thus fully spatialized sign-world of the mannequin. The great inducement behind the *representational* theory of nature (and, of course,

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of all the referential finalities: sex, economy, reason, history) was simply this. In the perspectival space of difference and of non-identity which was the real meaning of the sign and its referent (language and ontology) there was to be discovered the essential locus of human freedom. The comforting, *because antinomic*, system of referential finalities also worked its effect by providing an order of signification which militated against our tragic knowledge of the radical disenchantment of modern society. It's just what Foucault has said in *The History of Sexuality* about the impossibility of a "cynical power":

... power is tolerable only on the condition that it mask a considerable part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms. Would power be accepted if it were entirely cynical? For it, secrecy is not in the nature of an abuse; it is indispensable to its operation. Not only because power imposes secrecy on those whom it dominates, but because it is perhaps just as indispensable to the latter: would they accept it if they did not see it as a mere limit placed on their desire, leaving a measure of freedom — however slight — intact? Power as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability.¹



Giorgio de Chirico. *Landscape Painter*

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And thus, for Chirico, what was also at stake in the theoretical agenda of the order of referential finalities was a determined *trompe l'oeil* which shifted (our) perspective from the nihilism of a "cynical power" as the essence of the modern project to the already obsolete belief in the emancipatory qualities of history, which as the locus of the real had to signify something, *anything*. *Landscape Painter* cancels out forever the comforting antinomies of history/emancipation; and says that if we are to be emancipated (from ourselves) it will be within, and then beyond, the logic of the sign. In this age of a fully "cynical power" and a "cynical history", the landscape which is the object of *Landscape Painter* is that of power and the sign.

Chirico is, then, the painter of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*. In Nietzsche's famous, last postcard to Jacob Burkhardt, written just at the moment when he passed over into the silence of madness, he provided us with an important clue to the real terrorism of a sign-system, which being self-referential, tautological, and implosive, is also fully *solipsistic*. Nietzsche wrote: "The unpleasant thing, and one that nags at my modesty, is that at root every name in history is I". Nietzsche was, of course, the explorer of the new continent of the sign. His insight into the tragic sense of the sign was this: the wiping clean of the horizon of referential finalities makes of (us) the last inhabitants of a world which, based now only on "perspectival valuations", has about it only a dead will to truth, dead power, and a cynical history which do not exist except as a residue of symbolic effectors. For Nietzsche, "every name in history is I" just because he recognized, and this with horror, his imprisonment in the labyrinth of a sign-system which had about it the non-reality of a perspectival simulation. For Nietzsche, what drove on this fantastic reduction of society to the logic of the sign, what precipitated the implosion of the real into the semiology of a perspectival illusion, was just this secret: *the sign is power on its down-side, on its side of reversal, cancellation, and disaccumulation*. *The Will to Power* is the emblematic text which represents, at once, the locus and limit of the postmodernist imagination, or what is the same, the tragic theory of the sign which is everywhere now in intellectual and political discourse. And the source of the endless fascination of *The Will to Power*? Perhaps it's this: Nietzsche recognized that the sovereignty of the sign (he described sign-systems in the language of "perspectival valuations") meant the final reduction of society to the (abstract, semiological, and structural) language of willing. The fateful conjuncture of power/sign as the locus of the real also meant that the dynamic language of willing was finally able to confess its secret. All along the "will to power" had never been anything more than a brilliant inferno for the liquidation of the "real" and for the processing of society into the dark and seductive empire of the sign.

If Nietzsche screams out a warning that the postmodernist (and thus nihilistic) imagination always begins with the world in reverse image (the real as the site of exterminism *par excellence*), then Chirico paints the landscape of power/sign. With Nietzsche, Chirico's vision begins just on the other side, the abstract and nihilating side, of a radical paradigm-shift which is, anyway, what postmodern experience is all about. *Landscape Painter*, like all of Chirico's tragic productions, from *Turin, Spring* (the decoupling of space and individual perspective) and *The Disquieting Muses* (a haunting satire on the classical episteme of history) to *Two Masks* (the liquidation of human identity) and *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*

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(the cancellation of the space of the social), is based on three decisive refusals of representational discourse. This painting is simultaneously: *a refusal of the referent of the historical* (Chirico privileges the spatial sense and excludes a sense of time); *a refusal of the reality-principle of the social* (there are no human presences, only an instant and melancholy metamorphosis into a universe of dead signs); and *a refusal of the dialectic* (here there is no suppressed region of truth-claims, only an eclectic and randomized system of objects situated in relations of spatial contiguity). What is, perhaps, most disquieting about Chirico's artistic productions is that in refusing the referential logic of the sign and its signifying finalities, he has ruptured the dialectical logic of western consciousness. There are no "poles" in *Landscape Painter*; and this for the reason that Chirico is tracing a great, and reverse, arc in the cycle of modern power — an arc in which power in the *form* of an empty sign-system becomes nothing more than a perspectival simulation of *itself*. It's just the *lack* of signification in *Landscape Painter* that is most noticeable; and which, indeed, parallels most closely the *absence* of (embodied) power in *The Will to Power*. Like Nietzsche before him, Chirico recognized the structural logic of the sign as the essence of the language of power. This is why, perhaps, Chirico was able to trace, and this so brilliantly, an accelerating semiological implosion (the geometry of the sign) in modern experience. His was a world populated by bionic



Giorgio de Chirico. *Hector and Andromache*

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beings (*The Return of the Prodigal Son*), by objects floating free of their "natural" contexts (*The Song of Love*), by an almost menacing sense of silence as the background to the liquidation of the social (*The Enigma of Fate*), and by a complex hieroglyphics of the sign as the geometric, and thus perspectival, space within which we are now enclosed (*Hector and Andromache*). Chirico understood that the conjuncture of power/sign brought to the surface *the missing third term* in postmodernist theorisations of power: the "will to will" as the abstract, semiological unity imposed on an order of experience which was always only a system of mirroring-effects. For Chirico, it was just this hint of death in the language of the sign which was its great seduction; drawing out the political refusal of the "referential illusion", and making power interesting only when it reveals the reverse, hidden side of things: the side of mutilation, liquidation, and exterminism.

A.K.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 151.