De Chirico and Walker in light of Nietzsche and Guattari: The Enigma of Partial Bodies in Illogical Spaces

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If one concedes that the Freudian unconscious is inseparable from a society attached to its past, for example, its phallocentric traditions, Guattari’s alternative model dealing with “the production of subjectivity” offers a new perspective (1995: 11). From this vantage point, it is possible to map the way “every individual and social group” models the creation of subjectivity, a subjectivity “composed of cognitive references as well as mythical, ritual and symptomatological references” (1995: 11).

Guattari has reacted against Freud in the psycho-analytical domain because of his scheme’s inability to assimilate shifting social and political mores. Guattari, as so many of us, continues to employ Nietzschean perspectives. Nietzsche’s cartographies of the ‘body metaphysic’ accommodate a discourse of the arts that does not fall outside contemporary debate. Working within a Nietzschean context dealing with space, myth, the body, and perspectivism, this paper will examine a lineage in modern to contemporary art (from de Chirico to Walker) with a focus upon the representation of the body—of partial bodies in illogical space—and its enigmatic affects.

More specifically, we shall explore some of the most works by the contemporary artist, Deborah Walker, who overtly acknowledges Nietzsche and de Chirico as part of her artistic construction, and, to that extent, we shall introduce the artistic and intellectual context provided by both men. In addition, this paper aims to demonstrate how the visual arts provide a realm other than the verbal for the exploration of the enigmatic through its (re)configurations of the body in space.

(I)

De Chirico acts as a watershed in the way that the visual arts of the early twentieth century constantly re-configure the body in relation to space. His work explores representations of representations, often by specifically depicting partial presences—geometric shapes, empty frames, paintings within the painting and boxes (see Metaphysical Interior with Sanatorium, [1917]). Elizabeth Grosz discusses philosophical thought as an encounter. The thinking involved here has us confronting concepts from outside the concepts we already have, from outside the subjectivities we already are, from outside the material realities... (1995: 128).

We already know in the face of this work the nature of the problem; "...something in the world forces us to think" (Grosz, 1995: 129). It surprises us and leads us to ask, ‘what does this mean?’ The answer to the question what might this painting mean "is not reducible to either the exteriority of this world any more than to the psychological interiority of a thinking ego" (Deleuze, 1989: 174-175). We can see within this painting that the construction is placed within a theatrical scene; there is a double-headed figure which triggers conceptions of duality; there are disembodied parts of bodies, other disparate objects, and scientific inventions. This is a painting that takes us by surprise.

At the same time, de Chirico overtly regards his frame of reference as metaphysical, connecting his work with Nietzschean motifs, themes, and his actual life. Consider The Red Tower [1913]. In the setting of a piazza, bordered by arched porticos, is the partial outline of a shadowed equestrian statue with Carlo Alberto (the son of Victor Emmanuel who led Northern Italy in the Risorgimento). The foregrounded street view, the site of Nietzsche’s last address in which he collapsed in January 1899 (the year of de Chirico’s
However, cross-cultural references, so typical of Nietzsche, can be better garnered by an earlier depiction of the Florentine piazza in *The Enigma of the Autumn Afternoon* [1909]. Here, the statue of (a headless) Dante alongside a severed tree, not unlike that of the Apollo Belvedere in the Vatican, is juxtaposed not with the church of Sante Croce but with a quasi-classical bathing house. As can be seen from the above examples, these ‘classical’ representations of partial presences operate within ‘illogical’ spaces, illogical in the atemporal sense. Atemporality is conjoined with the non-gravitational in the late painting *Mysterious Bathhouses (Flight to the Sea)* [1968] where the staff of Apollo is foregrounded as an imposition of order. It is possible to construe that the separate dark and light bath-houses are emblematic of Dionysian and Apollinian motifs. In similar fashion, the clothed and naked figures in the painting are immobilised and seemingly silent. Given the placement of the bath-houses and the six figures, the painting suggests the splintering of the Apollinian and the Dionysian. The Greeks, according to Nietzsche (1872/1993: 20), saw music as an Apollinian art, but only because of its rhythm; the sound, by contrast, is Dionysian. The Apollinian staffs which can also be seen as large musical notes or signatures are an imposed form upon the painting: notes which stop short of song. What we have in this painting are all its elements separated, but promising a struggle towards expression. Nowhere is this more succinctly captured than in the figure of the oarsman in his small craft pointing towards the sea glimpsed in the background. As Nietzsche writes of humankind trapped in the ‘veil of Maya’ applicable to the Apollinian, and citing Schopenhauer directly:

> Just as the boatman sits in his little boat, trusting to his fragile craft in a stormy sea...so in the midst of a world full of suffering the individual man calmly sits, supported by and trusting the *principium individuationis* (1872/1993: 16).

The reference to the ‘principle of individuation’ is Schopenhauer’s means of highlighting that the mind’s experience of the diurnal world and its appearances was of distinct, separate entities.

On the contrary, even if we thought of these examples as dreamscapes, they invite the perceiving self to connect with fragmentations of the physical, historical, and/or social worlds represented. However, in Guattari’s terms, the act of dreaming is not the mere effluent of a self coping with its repressed construals of the waking world since such a view ultimately cannot deal with the question of “How are the representations of the exterior world changed when it itself is in the process of changing?” (Guattari, 1995:12). Dreaming is ‘productive’ of the self, as it were: it involves "incorporeal domains of entities we detect at the same time that we produce them" (Guattari, 1995: 17).

(ii)

What we have been demonstrating is that de Chirico is strongly influenced by Nietzschean philosophy; that, indeed, he believes that paintings can embody a philosophical message. This concern with the loss of unity and the separation of the Apollinian and the Dionysian is one that heralds the collision and collusion between modernism and postmodernism. The reflexivity in his work is one that influences Deborah Walker. Her apparently ‘naive realist’ paintings contain a philosophical, mythological, and poetic instancing of enigma, not a static conception of the mystery of life, but in the presences and absences apprehended. The ‘bodies’ or figurations that exist in these spaces are, in the Guattarian (1972/1995: 128-129) as opposed to the Freudian sense, ‘desiring machines’ caught in the moment between deep sleep and waking, the moment of emergence in which the Apollinian and Dionysian seem to coalesce. Their very stillness contains within them a pre-sentiment of knowing, flight, action: a presentation of the enigma and its affects.

At this point in our paper, let us now look at four of Walker’s works to show the congruence of philosophical and aesthetic interests depicted above. Perhaps contextualisation is necessary here. Deborah Walker has been painting for more than twenty years and has received numerous awards for her work. She believes that paintings, rather than being read by analysing iconography, might be more creatively read as engaging with myth, history and philosophy. Yet, this point of view needs to be seen within a framework where visual artists amongst others would in the main concur with Isadora Duncan’s famous statement that ‘if I could have put it into words there would have been no need to dance it.’ Expressed more formally, the latter can be construed in the following terms. Being reflective about art has, following Jean-Luc Nancy (1993: 28), two kinds of thought or language: "one type of thought...re-absorbs art" making it a different kind of knowledge and the other, pertinent to this paper, thinks of art "in its destination." The latter is the thought of the sublime or the enigmatic whereas the former is the thought that re-absorbs art and, in
In conversation, Walker sees herself as a painter who refuses to reduce the meaning of her art to knowledge. She does, however, believe that a “universe of constellations,” the mixing and movement of philosophical contexts always changing, reconnecting, and producing, may be a way of having a code to feel the enigma of her work. In her postgraduate studies, Walker has therefore chosen to look at a series of de Chirico’s paintings. The influence of his work on her own may be identified in his representation of components of visual enigma and his philosophical schema that informs his aesthetic and poetic vision. Objects are seen to have an internal life existing in time that is not characterised by chronological order.

Firstly, Walker argues that the way in which de Chirico’s work has been categorised has led to a serious misunderstanding of his art. Most apprehensions of de Chirico’s paintings divide his metaphysical paintings into two categories, the early works which were considered successful and the later ones which were seen as departures from his metaphysical interests and largely inferior to his early work. Walker’s argument explores, in what we construe as Deleuze and Guattari’s terms (1976/1983: 1-65), how the ‘tap-root’ system of knowledge has circumscribed de Chirico’s work within the surrealistic movement inappropriately and, furthermore, that this limited category served as a cause for neglecting any continuity in his work. In short, when the work evolved and incorporated elements not peculiar to the surrealistic, his works were deemed to have changed direction not only in his visual representations, but in his ontological and poetic concerns. The point of continuity that Walker identifies in his work is his obsessive interest in the presentation of enigma and the use of classical mythology throughout his life to paint what he saw as poetic revelations of the eternal meanings or enigma of things and bodies.

Walker identifies, in paintings ranging from 1913 to 1968, de Chirico’s four major preoccupations as follows:

(i) His interest in representations of enigma which she identifies in his representations of the interface between biographical moments and the application and re-invention of classical mythology across time.

(ii) The relations between a presence and an absence of the human subject rendered in part by the use of illogical figurations in illogical space (the human presence often being represented by a statue which in itself is once removed from the body itself).

(iii) His understanding of Nietzsche’s thinking and aesthetics concerning the Apollinian-Dionysian distinction.

(iv) His representation of this world in the form of places and objects whilst actually dislocating our perception of the world.

De Chirico’s arrangement and deployment of statues, sculptures, or mannequins to evoke the human presence is a method by which these pre-occupations are manifested. One of his persistent figures is that of Ariadne; a figure crucial to both de Chirico’s and Walker’s work. Both depict a sense of homelessness and stillness, always on the verge of awakening, suggesting paradoxically inaction and flight. As exemplified by The Sootsayer’s Recompense [1913], de Chirico chooses to utilise her in the act of sleeping. Ariadne, as most of us would be aware, was the daughter of the king and queen of Crete who fell in love with Theseus, one of the seven youths who was to be sacrificed to her brother, the Minotaur. She saves his life by giving him a ball of string that allowed him to find his way out of the labyrinth and her understanding is that he will claim her as his bride. But Theseus, after slaying the Minotaur, abandons Ariadne on an island where she was later found by Dionysus whom, in most extant versions, she married.) De Chirico chooses to use Ariadne’s form in a state of sleeping, of waiting, of being in a brief respite from her suffering at being rejected by Theseus. This place of dreaming, in which human perceptions are not dictated by empirical observations of conscious life and yet are open to the images provided by the underworld realm of unconscious thought, is derived by de Chirico in his readings of Nietzsche’s rendering of the relationship between the Apollinian and the Dionysian forces. Ariadne becomes an embodiment of dreaming-pain both in the world and yet separate from it. It is the same Ariadne myth that inspires Walker’s representation of a sense of homelessness, dreaming-pain and stillness.

(III)

Consider, in the light of the foregoing, Deborah Walker’s recent oil painting, The Dream [2000]. Like de Chirico’s use of the Ariadne myth, Walker composes this dreaming figure on a hard solid draped surface: we are aware of a statue-like form. In this, both artists use references to statues to endorse the Nietzschean point about the problematic relationship between appearance and reality. The perspective created,...
Tragedy, according to Nietzsche, can only be enacted when there is unity between the Dionysian and Apollinian aesthetic forces. Walker's painting enacts the schism that separated them. Consciousness destroys the primal oneness of the universe Nietzsche (1872/1993: 64-75) argues in his discussion of how Socratic thought splintered the original unity in art. This is an unsettling painting, one that embodies both Nietzsche's and de Chirico's influences. One suspects that there might be another story of the painter's own that is woven into this painting and as such may remain enigmatic. Nevertheless, given the Ariadne myth of loss, rejection, and the need to escape into stillness or with the flight of the horse, one suspects that the dream of the painter is besieged by obstacles—the division of mind and body, the unseen presence drawing the curtain, the teeth-like entrapment.

Before more detailed discussion, it is worth noting that Deborah Walker's paintings have unusual titles; titles which have been selected to highlight the connexions to a philosophical state dependent upon Nietzsche's aesthetic and cultural framework. Walker has commented that she was inspired by Nietzsche's description of a state of unknowing which he called the 'innocence of becoming.' As Joan Stambaugh (1985: 165) remarks, an 'innocence of becoming' frees us from "the relation to an existent being," be it a God or a Platonic Idea and frees us from "subordination to any final aim or goal" whatsoever. In other words, 'becoming' signals that there is "nothing outside the whole, outside this world" which is "perfect in a non-moral sense and has no further need of anything" (1985: 165). It also signals that "[n]othing exists primarily for the sake of anything else" (1985: 165). Hence, as Stambaugh concludes, everything literally is in a process of becoming; there is no reality beyond or outside the world of becoming about which one must feel guilt. This, of course, needs to be contextualised within Nietzsche's philosophical perspectivism, namely, there are as many truths as there are people coming to them: there is no one absolute truth. Walker also abandons the idea of an external truth such as a portrait or likeness. The images therefore embody the concept of the horror underlying the illusion of beauty.

Returning to these enigmatic titles, let us now discuss paintings from 1998/1999 "The Innocent" series as well as The Poem [1999], Homage [1999], The Unity I [1999]. In "The Innocent" series, the innocents, ready as they are to embark beyond their tranquility to further 'becoming,' take with them the torment, the loss, the fear, and the knowledge of the schism between Apollinian and Dionysian unity. This can in part be demonstrated by the oil painting Innocent I [1999]. This figure is dressed in clothes that do not ground it in any particular historical period. Indeed, the clothes could represent a tight yet dishevelled costume within which the figure looks uncomfortable. Furthermore, the large 'genderless' hat almost obscures the eyes as if it were containing ideas from within and refusing ideas from without. At first sight, the background suggests a storm-strewn sky and desert landscape. On closer inspection, the sky can also be seen as a theatrical backdrop. The figure is both playing a part and about to 'become' in another place.

Walker is aware of the question posed by her viewers about the gender of her figures: do they possess a discordant relationship with a 'male gaze'? Her response is to return to a Nietzschean reading rather than a feminist one. As Debra Bergoffen (2000: 25) argues,

Nietzsche...abandons the Oedipal idea that we need the lure of a complete object to sustain our desires. Stepping outside the Oedipal regime, Nietzsche calls on us to orient our desire around the abyss, the hole between the drive and its object, and to embrace the innocence of becoming. He calls on us to affirm the drive rather than the object and teaches us to value the gap that sustains the drive’s production of objects.

If we look at The Poem [1999], it is irrelevant whether the seated figure is male or female. The figure in a state of reflection is perhaps at a point of performance of a poem given the sense of a stage presence. Or perhaps the figure is 'the poem,' the artefact itself. Implicit also is that the figure, sitting on what might be a travelling trunk, is on a point of departure, of moving on, of 'becoming.' The figure is not open to any judgement outside the world: its reality exists within the frame and the experience of self as 'performer,' as the poem itself, or as a movement towards possible departure. The eyes of the figure look towards the experience of his or her own authenticity, that is, they require no communique or critique from another that chooses to categorise or judge. The meaning...
In so saying, Guattari returns us to Nietzsche. Sunrise of redemption, Walker follows the Nietzschean line expressed well by Zarathustra in "Before morning". The moment is an influence. Walker accepts from both de Chirico and Nietzsche. It is a position as a theatre or a stage, though, it might be added, a role in either involves a point of influence. The figure is being deeply reflective or in psychological despair. It is a position of one's own authenticity, that is, they require no internal need for anything. In other words, the figure, sitting on what might be a travelling trunk, is on a point of becoming. Will this consciousness destroy 'oneness'? Will the insight be a Dionysian one learnt from Silenus, the companion of Dionysus?

'Miserable, ephemeral race, children of hazard and hardship, why do you force me to say what it would be much more fruitful for you not to hear? The best of all things is something entirely outside your grasp: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second-best thing for you - is to die soon.' (1872/1993: 22)

As mentioned in passing previously, de Chirico represents Ariadne as always at the moment of abandonment, sleeping, a moment before transformation. Walker's work consciously selects figures that are still at a decisive moment. The Unity I [1999] evokes a representation of a consciousness of the moment. It is the ambiguity of the moment, where there is a sense of everything hanging in the balance, that Walker depicts as the space where the disunity of Apollinian and Dionysian forces prevail. Focusing on the moment is an influence Walker accepts from both de Chirico and Nietzsche. It is a position that in a Nietzschean sense is the opposite of goal-orientation or teleology. The moment captured in Walker's work is not deterministic; it has an inner necessity as opposed to being compelled by some external force. In the abandoning the fables of, say, Christian redemption, Walker follows the Nietzschean line expressed well by Zarathustra in "Before Sunrise" of Thus Spoke Zarathustra III when he addresses the heavens as the abyss of light. "To throw myself into your heights - that is my depth! To shelter myself in your purity - that is my innocence!” (cited in Stambaugh (1985: 169)) In looking, for example, at The Unity I, one must think only of this moment of 'becoming.' The figure is there in its partial absence. It reaches to the 'light' of the heavens ironically represented here as dark (the abyss) - a strategem de Chirico also uses in his paintings when representing moments that contain the two aspects, the Apollinian and the Dionysian in disjunction. The figure is set in an open landscape, but it is also dressed in the role, the appearance of a marionette doll, a 'being' yet an imitation of a 'being.' The figure has dancing shoes; it is stilled, but the promise of the dance is there. It contains the promise of the dance as much as the stillness that precedes it. The painting expresses the process of 'becoming.' As Nietzsche writes, "The meaning of becoming must be fulfilled, attained, completed in every moment" (cited in Stambaugh (1985: 170)) Is this figure, in Nietzsche's words, about to fly dancing into the heavens. His gestures express enchantment ...he [she] feels like a god... Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art (1872/1993: 18)?

(iv)

Where does this exploration of work by de Chirico and Walker leave us? In Guattari's terms, with which this paper began, we have suggested that illogical bodies in partial spaces enable the artist to re-conceptualise bodies as 'desiring machines,' a location of subjectivities by their enigmatic absence. In Guattari's own words (1980/1995:41), he refuses to talk of such representations as "ensembles of machines"

Because ensemble of machines would give the idea of a spatial disposition in relation to which individuals, subjects, would remain exterior, while arrangement problematizes enunciation and subjectivation: how a subject is fabricated. It points to a "conceptual chemistry," distinct from any axiomatic idea.

Indeed, Guattari realises in this 1980 interview with Robert Maggiori,

I prefer unstable, precarious, transitory chemical formulas... The concepts of "arrangement" and "machinic arrangements" have no claims to universality.
In so saying, Guattari returns us to Nietzsche’s perspectivism informing the intellectual framework within which de Chirico and Walker work. It is as if, when a Guattari poses the questions,

What processes unfold in a consciousness affected by the shock of the unexpected? How can a mode of thought, a capacity to apprehend be modified when the surrounding world itself is in the throes of change? How are the representations of an exterior world changed when it is itself in the process of changing (1995: 11-12)?

A de Chirico, having conceded that he "tried to express the strong and mysterious feeling...discovered in the books of Nietzsche," responds:

a painting is a vehicle for something new, something I did not know before...One must never forget that painting must be the reflection of a deep sensation, and deep means strange, and strange means hardly known, or altogether unknown (1945/1971: 61).

REFERENCES


Walker, Deborah (private communications, 1997-2002)