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Spectres in the City – De Chirico’s Mythologized Streetscapes

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It is generally accepted that some of the unsettling scenes of the Italian metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico, arose from his response to the northern Italian city of Turin, a city he claimed a great affinity with. While de Chirico’s paintings and commentary of this period abound with references to Turin, there has been little investigation into how genuine these cited locations really are. We know that de Chirico’s preference for Turin arose from his passionate engagement with the writings of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and Nietzsche’s fondness for the city. Yet there is much evidence to suggest that Munich, the city of de Chirico’s early art school days permeated his imagery more completely; whereas Turin reflected his philosophical and aesthetic concerns. This article examines how cities have operated for the artist and how using iconography from both the world of the real and imagined produced powerful enigmatic images that evoked a profound mood of illusion and revelation.

Appearance is for me the active and living itself, which goes so far in its self-mockery as to allow me to feel that there is nothing here but appearance and will-o-the-wisp and a flickering dance of spirits – that among all these dreamers I, too, the ‘man of knowledge’, dance my dance . . . and that the sublime consistency and unity of all knowledge is and will be perhaps the supreme means of preserving the universality of dreaming and the mutual intelligibility of all these dreamers and thereby the continuance of the dream. (Nietzsche, 1992)

The mysterious street scenes often shown in Giorgio de Chirico’s paintings are suggestive of a foreboding that is further increased by the shadowed, desolate
calm. They seem to convey both a sense of the familiar and the unknown. Yet the artist’s inspiration for these street scenes has remained largely hidden and unidentified and for this reason, I would like to look at not only the cities the artist referred to as inspiration, but also those he may have had direct experience of.

I recently visited a number of key sites in both Turin and Munich that were central to de Chirico’s imagery, and while I intended to research his claims and sources, my intention was not to reduce the evolution of the artist’s creative vision to a precise framework. Rather my search has been to consider the artist’s need to camouflage and misrepresent his visual stimulus and in doing so attempt to illuminate this creative impetus.

This research led me to think that he fused the cities of his preference with the cities of his experience, and constructed an inner landscape with complex references beyond the actual or geographical.

The artist’s use of this strategy also raises the question of why an artist sometimes camouflages or hides his influences and what is the nature of this impulse? Does it serve a greater, more urgent creative imperative? Investigating these contradictions can often reveal how misleading an artist comments are and, particularly in the case of de Chirico. The paradox between his claims and his intentions were a persistent aspect of his career.

One of the most significant of these contradictions was his statements about the cities of his inspiration.

De Chirico always considered that the northern Italian city of Turin and his experience of that city inspired strong feelings in him, yet there is little evidence of anything but a momentary visit in 1911.

De Chirico’s attractions to and claims about Turin undoubtedly arose from its association with Nietzsche and the artist’s awareness of it being Friedrich Nietzsche preferred city. The philosophers’ letters are filled with praise for it; ‘What a dignified and serious city it is! Turin, dear friend, is a discovery of the first importance’ (Nietzsche, 1969: 295). It was also a place where Nietzsche lived sporadically over the last year of his life, specifically in the Piazza San Carlo, a place that would also occupies mythical status. For it is the same piazza that witnessed Nietzsche’s poignant, final mental collapse, in January 1889, reputedly over an exhausted horse.

These elements combined with others to capture de Chirico’s visual imagination; for the city echoed many elements of his paintings, particularly the classical, uniquely laid out architecture. In his memoirs, he refers to a particular ‘stimmung’ or mood of the city, ‘the Italian city par excellence where this extraordinary phenomena appears is Turin’, (De Chirico, 1964: 55). Given de Chirico’s concern over his fragmented Italian heritage, Turin was also significant as the first capital of the Italian unification and the city’s history.
is reflected in the figurative statues of the Risorgimento evident there.

De Chirico always acknowledged his debt to Nietzsche, saying he wanted to paint subjects that expressed strong and mysterious feelings that he had discovered in the books of Nietzsche, (De Chirico, 1964: 55).

But upon examination is possible to see that de Chirico’s Turin is actually a construct of several cities including Florence, Paris and Berlin, although here I am concerned specifically with Munich, a city where he studied painting. While Chirico’s direct experience of Turin was brief, he spent several formative years in Munich, and it contains many of the architectural and artistic cultural icons with which he populated his own imagined versions of Turin. It is possible to trace these buildings and statuary in Munich and see how they featured strongly in his work.

Looking at the artist’s recurrent use of horse statuary in his work it is possible to see that while they may echo the Carlo Alberto Monument of both *The Red Tower* (1913) and *Turin in Spring* (1914), it is more convincing to consider its relationship to the classical figures on horses that flank the entrance to the Munich Art Academy. A place that de Chirico not only attended for a number of years but lived in the street opposite. It is also relevant to consider the triangular, arcaded building in *Turin in Spring* as not only representing the extensive porticoes of Turin but also reminiscent of Munich’s famous *Hofigarten*.

![Munich art academy](image)

![Turin in Spring](image)

Turin still looks much like it did at the beginning of the nineteenth century; as a Baroque city it has grace and precision, and the long rows of porticos could obviously be a source for the paintings.

De Chirico’s amalgam of references that suggest Turin, while often misleading are part of a more complex strategy of meaning in his work. Although the architectural landmarks of Munich, the city of his youth and early art school
days can easily be recognized in his imagery, this in no way detracts from the artist’s aesthetic decision about Turin. To my mind it expands and deepens the power of de Chirico’s imagined Italian city.

If we think of the youthful de Chirico in Munich, fresh from his early life as a child in Greece, a country he regarded as the cradle of civilization, it is not difficult to imagine his reaction to the Bavarian city. Munich is filled with extravagant and monumental buildings and unlike Greece they are not in ruins but are grandly maintained.

These settings must have been richly evocative to the young artist and they coincided at the same time with his discovery of Nietzsche’s writings. These writings lead him to understand the place Turin occupied in the philosophers wanderings and synthesised into the unique ingredients of de Chirico’s architectural iconography.

While there are numerous examples of these references, I want to limit these to only a few paintings and locations and in discussing de Chirico’s use of the city I also want to include the landmark public statuary that occupies those cities. Although these show a very small selection, there are numerous examples of the integration and juxtapositions of genuine locations throughout his work.

*The Red Tower* here incorporates the use of philosophical themes and Torinese icons. We see a darkened walkway in the foreground to the piazza, leading directly to a view of a circular red tower in the background, presumed to be a reference to the famous Turin building, the Mole Antionelliana. While the tower is surrounded by a number of small houses there is an empty, unpopulated mood in the setting. The silhouetted equestrian statue is obscured and partially visible across the walkway. Despite the painting’s mood of dormant inactivity there are many clues to suggest de Chirico’s themes, particularly of disunity and duality.

The 19th century equestrian shadow in this painting is clearly part of the Carlo
Alberto statue; a king of the Sardinian Empire. He historically represents both a crucial stage in the development of Italian modernity as well as representing the failure of an historical opportunity. In the crossed web of references de Chirico’s describes not only the failure of history but highlights also the relentless recurrence of tragic outcomes.

So, essentially we can see that these interconnected references reflect a Nietzschean construct, where the Dionysian abyss is not softened and where Nietzsche’s themes of disunity remain, and remain unconsolled.

We know de Chirico used images of statuary throughout his career and they included figures from not only Turin and 19th century history, but from classical antiquity and the world of mythology. The selections of these statues are from a variety of sources; not just from the classical world, but also chosen for their embodiment of meaning. Statues of the fatherland acknowledge not just de Chirico’s sense of the absent father but with our knowledge of the events connected to Nietzsche’s, this piazza location suggests the real father of de Chirico’s ideas. The duality of responses we have to these statues evolves from a number of devices. They are seemingly alive yet emanate, a melancholy stillness; viewing these leave us with a sense of mourning, a suggestive feeling of the eternal.

I regard de Chirico’s experience of Munich as something woven together with the iconography of Turin to form an internalized, invented city. The device liberated his imagery and enabled him to create an enigmatic setting for his philosophical visions; in other terms, he mythologized Turin for his creative purposes.

Fusing all these elements together gave the artist’s a way of retaining the personal yet revealing publicly his ideas and locations. I think this was a
necessary strategy for him creatively, as it gave him the aesthetic mask behind which to employ more profound themes.

It also satisfied his deep intellectual and emotional connection to Nietzsche’s ideas and, indeed to the revelatory nature of them (in which Nietzsche’s perspectivism or at least his preoccupation with the problem of perceptual unity could be argued visually).

So Turin did have an important role in the work, but now let us look at what de Chirico took from Munich.

In particular we can see elements of Munich clearly in the famous Hofgarten, shown here next to de Chirico’s *The Enigma of the Day*, where the two arcades are noticeably similar. Reminiscent of Greek and Roman architecture these classical arcades were surely a place where the artist spent considerable time, given its proximity to the Munich Art Academy.

We can easily recognize the relationship between the arcades of the Hofgarten and the piazza in the painting and it is therefore possible to see that the re-inventing of a site fuses with the desire to suggest Turin and ultimately his philosophical and aesthetic schema.

One aspect of Nietzschean philosophy that de Chirico’s employed was his use of dualities, specifically related to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, (1993) where his discussion of tragedy within an Apollonian/Dionysian framework could fuse and manipulate references that discuss tragedy and disunity.

So his claim to the use of one city underlies the need to use another, and that in doing so, he may be employing one of his favourite Nietzschean themes.
The artist’s was notorious for his nebulous, cryptic statements about his work and intentions, particularly in claiming his influence from cities and places, this habit certainly reinforced his mysterious and enigmatic persona, his sense of unknowableness.

It certainly operated in his use of objects and sites that could transcend merely the representational image. His strategic use of the city gives a framework for viewing the imagery, because it retains an essential ingredient of his work and aims; it is located in the real.

For de Chirico, visual enigma needs to both play the traditional role of recognizable narrative imagery and yet also be an experience of the unknown, an enigma that remains enigmatic. Therefore his hidden meaning, with dual references opens up the possibility to a more profound experience of apparent reality. Given that we know the paintings are rooted in the real or the recognizable we can then see that de Chirico used this apparent reality to offer the viewer a key entry point to the unknown. But the viewer is not just participating in surface appearances of reality in the painting; these points of entry are mechanisms for activating an illusion.

The notable feature of these paintings, where de Chirico used a kind of hybridized city, where the relationship between illusion and apparent reality are evident, inevitably connects him with Nietzsche’s overarching concern, namely, the problem of reality. As Caroline Tisdall suggests, ‘the subtler grasp of the power of jarred reality, strange juxtapositions that are potent because they seem credible’, (Tisdall (1971: 8). In many ways one could argue that the crux of de Chirico’s use of hybridized cities is an attempt to render visually Nietzsche’s themes.
If this is the case then the imagery can be seen as a discussion of the contrast of the seemingly real world (places and objects say), yet simultaneously dislocating our perception of that world.

The combined use of fused references does make a convincing setting yet, ultimately they operate as illusionary places. Places that give a conflicted experience for they are convincingly lodged in the real world while at another level we sense the manipulation, and our perception is jarred and our understanding of reality challenged.

So let us look at some of the accuracies and apparent realities of the cities de Chirico used. How did he mesh disparate locations and objects to invent a parallel world? And if it entailed creating a hybrid, imagined city how then did de Chirico populate it?

While de Chirico’s statues of frock coated historical figures and shadowed Greek gods arise from concrete forms, the fusion of them in invented cities, operate as a paradox. For their emotional suggestiveness, combined with their immobility trigger a variety of mixed feelings. Viewing these statues gives one the experience of not so much seeing a stone carving but rather of encountering a dreaming, internalized figure, one in a possible trance state. It is obvious that he understood that using statues resulted in a well-recognized figurative ambiguity and, by this device, suggested another duality; one of absence and presence.

The frock-coated nineteenth century statue that reoccurs in de Chirico’s paintings has been identified many times by scholars as Count Camillo de Cavour. Cavour was the prime minister of the United Kingdom of Italy and in *The Enigma of the Day*; de Chirico has turned the father of Italian unification
to stone. The architect of the new Italy stands frozen in front of two towers next to a building of porticoes. (De Chirico scholars generally agree that his main source for the Cavour statue is the 1865 public statue, Monument to Cavour, by Odoardo Tabacchi and Anotinio Tantartdini in the public gardens in Milan).

The Enigma of the Day typifies de Chirico’s imaginative strategies. We know the towers are suggestive of buildings of Turin but they also imply the phallic power of the Dionysian. The only indication of life is in the two distant figures in the landscape with the barren wasteland of the painting creating a sense of the defeated and abysmal. The half-shadowed Cavour statue appears poised and suggestive, but it is in contrast to the inaction and stillness around him. It is possible to see the interdependence of the Apollonian-Dionysian unity in these works and in Nietzschean terms ‘he is at once subject and object, at once poet, actor and audience.’ (Nietzsche, 1978: 32)

De Chirico always shunned the fantastic, and his subjects accentuate the real and depend on real objects, but he is able to activate a much deeper philosophical discussion visually by his choice and fusion of icons when he does so. In considering Nietzsche’s ideas about form and art, de Chirico found a visual means for representing figuration and therefore reality.

This strategy of engaging cities and statues also creates an active dialogue between the past and modernity, for we know that both central Turin and Munich have largely remained architecturally the same.

In his novel Hebdomerous (1964), de Chirico compares islands to chambers and it is possible to see his piazza settings in this context. When we look at the various works that engage cities, he often has the statue on a stone pedestal, seeming to float in the centre of the piazza. With this quality they reinforce the feeling of an invented island city, surrounded by a moat and isolated from the constraints of reality.

De Chirico understood the problem facing 20th century aesthetics when he first began painting, and he also found a way through this dilemma by his creative re-configuring of the places and objects of importance to him – his re-evaluation of the real was essential to this task.

The Italian scholar Paolo Baldacci, in his article Nietzsche’s Thought in De Chirico’s Art, says

“...There is no question that de Chirico recognized early on the dead end of Idealist aesthetics. Western metaphysics, then at its peak, was intent upon lifting the veil of appearances; yet its impulse toward the truth and the artistic refinement of intuition had suddenly been transformed into recognition of the absence of truth itself. Nietzsche gave de Chirico the means with which to face the “newly discovered, terrible void” (Baldacci, 2001: 94).
Baldacci’s comments highlight the historical crisis art faced in this period and the discovery of Nietzsche’s writings came for de Chirico’s at a critical time in the history of early 20th century art. Early on the artist claimed to have understood Nietzsche more than other scholars, and it is easy to see the kind of allure the philosopher’s concerns would have for the artist.

Nietzsche asks in *Human, All Too Human*, (1992: 354) to be forgiven for finding the living like shades, pale and restless and instead he explains how he finds the ancient classical and historical figures to be so alive, to have an eternal liveliness. When Nietzsche says that that these important figures look upon him and he looks back at them, we understand the captivation for de Chirico’s, for it is this very same dialogue that drives the artist’s aesthetic. This dialogue was able to include his personal history, his love of classicism, as well as the accelerating, discordant modernity of the century.

His connection to imbuing objects and spaces with a value beyond the recognizable must be his great contribution to metaphysical art and art history. Nietzsche claimed that, like Odysseys, he had been to the underworld, communicating with the dead and it is not difficult to see that de Chirico took the philosopher’s voyaging to his heart.

He wholly embraced the Nietzschean spirit and immersed himself in a Dionysian landscape using its visual graveyard of classical history, invented cities and personal icons. It was his map in a labyrinth of references. This task occupied him intensely during his early years in Munich, and his fusion and integration of cities of imagination shaped not only his entire vision but, also the way we are able to look at art now.

For it is a world where the duality of experience both protects and yet intrudes on the real and enables the artist and viewer to inhabit an other-world reality, in short an enigmatic illusion.

**References**


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