Time in Giorgio de Chirico's Metaphysical Paintings

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TIME IN GIORGIO DE CHIRICO’S METAPHYSICAL PAINTINGS

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Abstract

A subtle transformation in the fundamental cognition of a generation could trigger overwhelming ripples throughout the society. Time as an essential concept went through tempestuous changes in late nineteenth-century Europe because of the revolutionary development in railway system. Art world in cross-century Europe also witnessed unprecedented upheavals. Founder of Metaphysical Painting, Giorgio de Chirico was born to that age and was renowned for his complicated opinion towards modernism. This thesis intends to present how the change in the basic perception of time permeated the society, influenced ways of production, inspired art movements, and got reflected in art works.

Railway and universal time systems integrated the world into a whole for the first time. As a result, a universal acknowledgement of simultaneity came into being, which brought along a sense of connection worldwide. With the help of the mass production of clocks, such sense of connection encouraged a new pattern of production, which turned an individual’s time into collective social resource. The rapid developments in technology and the unprecedented productivity created social spectacles that could represent the highest standard of the present and a tempting signal that indicated future. Attempting to access the promising future, modern artists tried to be the pioneer of their age by disentangling themselves from academic tradition. Giorgio de Chirico, founder of Metaphysical Painting and a modernist, remained sober and solitary in modernism. Influenced by Nietzsche, de Chirico tried to regain his peace in eternity through metaphysical paintings, and later in his life, through academic tradition.
Chapter 1. Introduction

What we now take for granted might appear to be heretic a few centuries ago. For example, one might think the planetary system to be self-evidently sun-centered, yet Galileo Galilei and Nicolaus Copernicus died for advocating this theory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Based on a sun-centered planetary system, scientists and philosophers developed various structures that could explain this world in different ways, reshaping the Weltanschauung of generations, and challenging religions. A simple change in one’s fundamental cognition could bring about significant changes to the way the individual sees the world. Similarly, a subtle transformation in the fundamental cognition of a generation could trigger overwhelming ripples throughout society. Art, especially modern art, which overlaps with different fields of natural and social sciences extensively, should be a great reflection of these changes. Being produced under the influence of distinct historical forces as well as an artist’s idiosyncratic identity, artworks quietly tell what has been going on in their age.

The reflection of the idea of time in de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings from between 1911 to 1917 would be a great sample of such coalescence between modern art and sciences. First of all, the nineteenth century witnessed exciting developments in new and essential technologies, which include telegraphy, railway systems and mass-produced clocks. Railways led to the need for accurate public timekeeping, which was then assured by observatories and clocks. However, the un-synchronized time systems around the world of the nineteenth century then caused confusion. Travelers had to remember several slightly different local times for a relatively short journey. Even Sir Sandford Fleming, the chief engineer of the Canada Pacific Railway, missed his train at the station of Bandoran to Londonderry in 1876 because he was
confused by the complicated timetable.\(^1\) In order to resolve this problem, in 1884, the world agreed on one united and uniform time system. Together with the invention of the telegraphy, which allowed individuals separated by distance to get connected immediately, timekeeping fostered the sense of a global village and the idea of simultaneity. Thanks to these innovations, until the late nineteenth century, the political and economic map of the world became greatly different from what it was only one century earlier. All of these changes combined produced the cultural milieu from which de Chirico emerged.

Born in 1888 in Greece to a family of engineers, de Chirico enjoyed the prestigious social standing of his family and admired his father very much. In the pre-World War I years, when nation states emerged, engineers were regarded as game changers. For example, de Chirico mentioned his tutor, Pistono, in Athens in his *Memoirs*. Pistono wrote poems to pay tribute to an Italian engineer, Serpieri, who “occupied himself with making the mines work.”\(^2\) However, such idolatry of engineering was part of the hopes for technological development that is, the passion for the newer, stronger, and faster. Time, in that era, became a social resource to be spent. The arrow of time, it seemed, was to point in the direction of a better future. Such tendencies affected art and culture and helped promote the advent of modernism.

De Chirico was a modernist who resented modernism. He criticized modernism mainly because modern art abandoned the traditional emphasis on technical ability and on craftsmanship.\(^3\) He also despised his peers’ desperate desire to pioneer new trends in art. For example, Carlo Carrà, who worked closely with de Chirico in Ferrara during the World War I in

\(^{3}\) Ibid., 57.
1917, appeared in de Chirico’s writing as someone who clandestinely tried to claim Metaphysical Painting for himself. As a response to modernism, de Chirico tried to seek peace in his own paintings, the metaphysical paintings, which resounded with nostalgia, melancholy, and anxiety; he also invested them with a sense of eternity. However, these paintings were met with a warm welcome from the Parisian art world, which in turn bestowed on de Chirico the title of the “inventor” of metaphysical painting, which made him an important figure of modernism. The same sense of eternity later on became his motivation for pursuing an immutable standard for good pictures, which made him an integral part of the “retour à l’ordre” movement.

De Chirico bridges the distance between technological developments and a unified time system, and the mentalities of the turn of the twentieth century which praised speed and the future. Capturing the ripples in art and cultures of modernity, in his metaphysical painting, de Chirico’s time-space perception broadened into a generation’s reckoning with the past, present, and future. He retained his solitude from the pervasiveness of simultaneity, and made metaphysical paintings and the classical past a means to access eternity in response to modernism. Various artists, engineers and philosophers gave varying responses to the initial idea of the changing notion of time. De Chirico was simply one of the many thinkers in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries who were pre-occupied by this question.

This thesis consists of three chapters. Chapter one, Introduction, gives an outline for the thesis with a brief on related publications. Chapter two, Technologies and the Illusion of Simultaneity, will expound on the progress of the railway system in nineteenth-century Europe, especially in Greece, where de Chirico’s father worked as a chief engineer. The progress in railway systems involved various problems, such as the break with older perceptions of time and

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distance, as well as the confusion between local time and standard time. This confusion was finally resolved by the International Meridian Conference held in 1884 in Washington, D.C., which divided world time into twelve time zones. As a result, people gained the sense of being connected with everyone else on earth within the same time system. In the meantime, the expansion of telegraphy encouraged such sentiment and met the public’s demand for the experience of simultaneity. Even before the twentieth century, the public became excited with the intimate connections which technologies of simultaneity could offer. A bit later, in 1911, in the same year when Paris finally accepted the GMT (Greenwich Mean Time), de Chirico created the *Enigma of the Hour* (fig. 5), in which three alienated figures serendipitously share the same instant in time, thus raising the question of their being connected through simultaneity.

The second chapter, *The Illusion of Progress* will analyze how the sense of connection allowed the social pursuit for the future, and explaining de Chirico’s response to the pursuit of the future in modern art through his *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (fig. 9). The first part of the chapter, *Individual’s Time Versus Collective Time*, elaborates on the social pursuit of speed and the idolatry of the future. In eighteenth-century England, praise for industry and the condemnation for idleness came hand in hand. As encouraged by speedy trains, enhanced materials, and immediate connections through telegraphy, the morality of the individual was sublimated into a motivation at force of society. The worker’s choice between being industrious or idle no longer mattered. Industry evolved with the hum of machines, not human beings. In the 1880s, the American mechanical engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor developed the Scientific Management theory and later influenced Europe in the early twentieth century. The equivalent of

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Taylorism in art and culture during that period of time was modernism. Ever after Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, artists insisted on their individual visual language, or art language in general. De Chirico, instead, focused on the message conveyed through his paintings from the beginning. During his metaphysical period (1911-1917), he expressed his ideas through eerie images, ancient architecture and timeless settings. After the metaphysical period, de Chirico continued his experiments as a return to order artist. In 1949, he gave a lecture in England for an exhibition. In this lecture, he elaborated on the decadence of art in the twentieth century, affirmed the malady of modern art, and foresaw an affirmative future for art based on the weakening of the modernist dictatorship.  

The second part of the second chapter will investigate one of de Chirico’s metaphysical painting from 1914, *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, taking the perspective of Fredrich Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence. De Chirico admired Nietzsche since his youth. Both the reflections of genius and the poetic undertone brimming in Nietzsche’s writings influenced de Chirico. De Chirico himself acknowledged that some of his works drew inspiration from Nietzsche’s words, such as the metaphysical painting *The Enigma of the Oracle*. One of Nietzsche’s major theories was eternal recurrence, which points out the illusion of progress and concluded the world as a perpetually forming ring. De Chirico exemplified the idea of eternal recurrence in his painting *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* through the element of a girl with a hoop. Furthermore, such ideas can also explain de Chirico’s contradictory attitude toward modernism.

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Several encyclopedic books about Giorgio de Chirico’s life experiences, as well as his painted works, have been consulted for this thesis. Most of them mention de Chirico’s admiration for Fredrich Nietzsche and Arnold Böcklin. James Trall Soby wrote *Giorgio De Chirico*, in which he covered the years through de Chirico’s youth until the end of his metaphysical period and analyzed many of his representative paintings. Similarly, Paolo Baldacci wrote *De Chirico: The Metaphysical Period 1888-1919*. Kathleen Toohey’s *Melancholy, Love and Time* and Keala Jewell’s *The Art of Enigma: The de Chirico Brothers and the Politics of Modernism* are also considered standard works.

De Chirico himself was also a prolific writer. Three of his books are of particular importance for this thesis. *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, *Hebdomeros* and the *Poèmes Poesie*. Unlike many other autobiographers, de Chirico did not concern himself much with his overall life experience, but was keen to share his thoughts on specific moments, special individuals, and subtle sensations. For example, he loved to share dreams or special emotions that related to death. At least four times in his short memoirs he engaged this subject. On one occasion he did so even in a story about a friend. His novel *Hebdomeros*, reads like an alternative version of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Hebdomeros was the main character, or the alter ego of de Chirico. In the introduction, James A. Hodkinson praised this

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book to be an important work of Surrealist literature that was undervalued. Interestingly, in both *Hebdomeros* and his poetic collection *Poèmes Poesie*, there are many elements that correspond to his visual works, including such details as locomotives and ancient architecture.

There are numerous books which consider time from different perspectives. For the developmental psychology’s perspective, one can cite *The Child’s Conception of Time* by Jean Piaget, which provided examples of experiments about a child’s conception of time regarding time, velocity, and distance. Another French psychologist, Paul Fraisse, gave a more thorough introduction on further aspects of the problem, including such aspects as direction, sequence, etc., in his book *The Psychology of Time*. In the book *The Psychology of Time Perception*, British psychologist John Wearden explained various experiments involving timing patterns in humans and animals, and discussed the perception of time both in technical and in experimental psychological terms.

Furthermore, Helga Nowotny explained time in a theoretical way in his publication *Time: Modern and Postmodern Experience*. In this book, Howotny provided a brief history of time and pointed out several questions about time, such as the problem of simultaneity. Similarly, Adrian Brandon showed concern with the theoretical aspect of the concept of time, but is more scientific in approach, in his book *A Brief History of the Philosophy of Time*. In the book *Direction of Time*, edited by Sergio Albeverio and Philippe Blanchard, selected essays mainly

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addressed the problem of time in physics. Among the essays, *On Abuse of Time-Metaphors*, written by Anindita Niyog Balslev, the author mentioned two graphs by which different civilizations compared time, one is line, the other is circle. Line and circle correspond to linear time and circular time, respectively.

Aside from theoretical and aspects of time, I specifically investigated literature that analyzed time in a nineteenth-century historical context, such as how Universal Time came into being. Interestingly enough, all the materials that analyze the history of time in the nineteenth century contain extensive illustrations of the railway system at that point. In the *Greenwich Time and the Discovery of the Longitude*, Derek Howse introduced the history of time measurements, and elaborated on the set up of the Greenwich Observatory. More importantly, he illustrated from a cultural, economic, and political perspective how the public time signal came into existence, an event which led to the Greenwich Mean Time being advocated as the Universal Time. Malcolm M. Thomson, in the book *The Beginning of Long Dash: A History of Timekeeping in Canada*, portrayed Canada as a pioneer in the set-up of universal time. His account also provides detailed information on how the stores, trains, and local town halls operated in nineteenth-century Canada. Clark Blaise, author of *Time Lord*, one of the most passionate authors from this selection, expressed his great respect for Sir Sandford Fleming, a surveyor who was once the chief engineer of the Canadian Pacific Railway and promoted universal time.

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21 Blaise, *Time Lord*. 
Given its prevalence in de Chirico’s paintings and in his personal life, the railway system weighs much in this thesis. Although English documents on the nineteenth-century Greek railway are quite sparse, there are plenty of materials about railroads in Europe as well as histories of trains around the world in general available. Irene Anastasiadou, in the book *In Constructing Iron Europe: Transnationalism and Railways in the Interbellum* developed a picture of the European railway that is completely different from what we know today. Private railway companies strove to survive in a tense political environment; political concerns many times would overwrite economic concerns when planning on a new line, etc. From the perspective of introducing a new invention, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, in his book *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, provided substantial statistics regarding the development of railroads and recorded the great enthusiasm about trains of that gripped generation of de Chirico.

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Chapter 2. The Illusion of Simultaneity

Time to one’s cognition is like air to life. Normally, one does not need to discover “time.” Instead, one generates the idea of time unconsciously in order to rationalize the experienced environment with which one interacts. However, the development of physics, philosophy, and technology brought the concept of time into the public’s sight in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Social morality put an emphasis on the utilization of time, which tied speed to the development of a society and made the future more tangible to the present. As a result, the idolatry of speed and the quest for novelty led to the “speeding up of history.”24 As the idea of the future became more and more vivid, a new genre in literature—time travel, became popular to the general audiences. For example, in 1895, H. G. Wells published his novel *Time Machine* in England. In the same year, Gaston de Pawlowski began to write *Voyage au pays de la quatrième dimension* in France.25

It is fair to say that the idea of time in the nineteenth century was distinct from that in earlier ages. Thinkers of that vibrant age distilled “time” from everyday moment, from the attachment to space, and presented the extracted “time” as an absolute concept and an enigma. When it comes to the art world, de Chirico was not the only one to address the metaphysical aspect of time in an artwork. In the twentieth century, Russian cubo-futurist artist David Burliuk painted works that relate to metaphysical time, including *The Time* (1910), *Advent of Spring and Summer* (1914) and *Father Time* (1927), etc. The French artist Georges Valmier, an early member of Abstraction-Création, who tried to catch every trend in art though-out his life, also

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investigated the subject when he painted *Time* in 1929. Surrealist artist René Magritte painted *Time Transfixed* (fig. 1) in 1938, which showed a clock on a chimney piece in front of a mirror, under which a steam engine emerges from a fireplace. However, what made de Chirico different from the other artists who presented time was that the enigma of time, which, for de Chirico, was the answer to his ambiguity towards modernism.

Fig. 1. René Magritte, *Time Transfixed*, 1938, oil on canvas, 147 cm × 98.7 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

Technological development brought many changes to the modern age. Temporally, the gap between present and future seemed to have shortened. Spatially, the connection which simultaneity brought, “the special extension of a standardized time,” began to “encompass the
world.”

When confronting these two changes, de Chirico became an anti-modernist who sought his peace in eternity, and styled himself as a solitary figure. The spatial change was epitomized by new means of transportation.

2.1. Experienced Time

The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget discussed the fundamental meaning of the perception of time in both psychology and in philosophy in his book *The Child’s Conception of Time*. Interestingly enough, it was the physicist Albert Einstein, who inspired Piaget to think more deeply about this issue. In the *Principles of Topological Psychology*, Kurt Lewin concluded that fundamental sciences study the world that is perceived by an individual whereas psychology studies the subject that is perceiving from the perspective of the outside world. The axis of coordinates of the interrelation between fundamental sciences and psychology is formed by time and space. Compared to space, time does not have visible elements and is more intangible than space. Whether the concept of time and space are innate or not does not have too much influence on the specific issue of experienced time. The more important point is that the perception of time resides in the very fundamental layer of one’s cognition, which would influence the way one perceives the world in general. Experiencing time, as the source of the perception of time, dominates the corresponding changes to one’s perception of the world. In the case of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the unprecedented expansion of public transportation, timekeeping systems and the process of industrialization greatly shaped the conception of time of the generation of Giorgio de Chirico. The transformation of such

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fundamental conceptions would lead to significant changes to the collective philosophical outlook of an age.

2.2. Railway System

Piaget used three elements to examine child’s perception of time: time, quantity, velocity.29 In one experiment which Piaget designed for eight-year-old children, there were two flasks, one mounted on top of the other, which were mutually connected. A predetermined amount of water was poured into the flask on top. Immediately, the water flowed into the flask at the bottom. When the operator stopped pouring water, the flask on top was empty and the flask at the bottom was full. However, the children were not able to tell if the time for water going through the two flasks was the same. The different quantity of water in the two flasks confused their judgement for the time passed.30 Similarly, as verified by later researchers, the younger children in such experiments could not stop associating temporal features from non-temporal features. The children involved into the experiments judged time under the influence of features like “distance traversed,” “quantity of liquid accumulated,” “size and shape of vessels used,” etc.31 As Piaget transformed “distance traversed,” “quantity of liquid accumulated” and “size and shape of vessels used,” into formulas of time, distance, and velocity, he came to define time through interaction with space and visualized time into as abstract line. Arguably, time, quantity, and velocity together constitute the final points of one’s experience of time and are the starting point of one’s perception of time. The railway system of the nineteenth century overthrew the older, established time-distance-velocity system and revolutionized the perception of time for

30 Ibid., 7.
whole generation. De Chirico was born and raised in this context. To de Chirico, the railway was important as a reference point in his contemporary environment as well as in his personal life.

De Chirico was born in Greece and spent most of his youth in Italy and Greece before his father’s death in 1905. The Greek railway system developed relatively slower than those of the more mature industrial countries like France, England and Germany. Before the first railroad was built in 1869, overland transportation in Greece relied on pack animals and carriages. At this point in time, in the 1830s, trains in England already achieved up to thirty miles per hour. One of the reasons for Greece’s industrial backwardness was its war of independence in the 1820s. This war was waged against the Ottoman Empire until Greece was recognized as an independent country in 1830. Subsequently, Greece managed to expand its territory to include the province of Thessaly, which was previously under the Turkish rule. In between 1869 to 1922, the routes of the Greek railway system expanded to include the Thessaly territory to assure that it would become a permanent part of the Greek nation and an integral part of the economy.

Then in 1882, Evaristo de Chirico, the father of Giorgio de Chirico, started the Thessaly railway project as the chief engineer. Six years later, in Volos, the capital of Thessaly, Giorgio de Chirico was born.

The social environment in which de Chirico grew up was full of praise for the railway system. Thinkers from various field wrote about railways and the unprecedented change they brought to the modern society. The “annihilation of space and time” was the catch phrase of the

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33 Anastasiadou, *In Constructing Iron Europe*, 204.
35 Anastasiadou, *In Constructing Iron Europe*, 204.
nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{37} Constantin Pecqueur, the French sociologist, saw the possibility of France shrink into the “old île-de France,” as “on the map of imagination, all of these would finally be reproduced and reduced down to the infinitely small!”\textsuperscript{38} Such discussions of the great changes that the railway brought to space and time began in the early nineteenth century and did not stop until the early twentieth century.

Fundamentally, what changed was people’s perception of time, which could be deciphered through time, distance, and velocity. Astronomers rely on longitude to determine time. Children use measurable quantities to perceive time. How we perceive time depends on distance. For sure, the reality of space and time did not change because of the introduction of the steam engine.

Traditional transportation methods relied on a relatively stable constant summarized in the formula of velocity= time/distance. Speed of walking was around 3.1 miles per hour. Speed of carriage was around 10 to 15 miles per hour. As aforementioned, some English railways reached up to thirty miles per hour in the 1830s. Railway technology developed rapidly during the century. In 1939, the steam-powered Hiawatha train in the mid-western United States reached the maximum of one hundred miles per hour.\textsuperscript{39} When one compares the one hundred miles per hour to the 3.1 miles per hour, it is not hard to imagine the revolutionary change for one’s perception of time. The locomotives, as a result, broke the initial ratio between time and distance. One can travel to a further city in an even shorter period of time. The space-time structure of one’s psychological field was then shattered by the flexible and unprecedented velocity.

\textsuperscript{37} Schivelbusch, \textit{The Railway Journey}, 33.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{39} Jim Scribbins, \textit{The Hiawatha Story} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 64.
However, the speed of a horse can also reach up to 55 miles per hour, but it typically hovers about 20 miles per hour. The speed of locomotives would not appear to be extraordinary, considering that horses can run 10 miles per hour faster. How could the railway system thus initiate any discussion about the “annihilation of space and time” in the early nineteenth century? Let us start with the expression itself. “Annihilation of space and time,” on the one hand, indicates the loosened tie between space and time; on the other hand, it implies a sense of strangeness. When one is riding a horse, no matter how fast it goes, the rider needs to constantly interact with the horse and its surroundings. When it comes to a locomotive, passengers simply sit in the car without any active interaction with the running machine or the nature surrounding it. The strangeness would become apparent once the passenger walks out from the train hours later and is exposed to a place that is hundreds of miles away. During the trip, the passengers exist outside from the conventional space-time continuum and escape into thought. As one no longer interacts with one’s surrounding environment, the moment would become vacant.

Therefore, the locomotive could be the symbol of an independent time-space structure, which agrees with the uncanny character of the trains in de Chirico’s metaphysical painting. For example, in his paintings *Piazza d’Italia* (fig. 2) from 1913 and *Gare Montparnasse (The Melancholy of Departure)* (fig. 3) from 1914, steaming trains are running in the far background, and exist in disharmony with the motionless and muted setting.
Fig. 2. Giorgio de Chirico, *Piazza d’Italia*, 1913, oil on canvas, 35.2 cm × 25 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Fig. 3. Giorgio de Chirico, *Gare Montparnasse (The Melancholy of Departure)*, 1914, oil on canvas, 140 cm × 184.5 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
2.3. Timekeeping

“The clock, not the steam engine, is the key machine of the modern industrial age,”\textsuperscript{40} says Lewis Mumford, a twentieth-century American historian of technology. No matter what qualifies as the “key machine” of the modern age, the development of time-keeping technology, together with the expanding railway systems, captivated young people’s vision of the world before World War I.

As the bio-clock of an individual is formed by repeating habits, the collective human bio-clock consists of social patterns. Living habits mold people’s daily life into time: one would habitually know when to get up, when to eat, when to work, and when to sleep. Thus, we have the expressions of “morning,” “noon,” and “night.” They are expressions of time that are filled with default activities. These activities are reflections of an internal clock, which is innate to animals and can only work through constantly sensing the natural world. The expressions, “morning,” “noon,” and “night” are moments, which exist not in objective time but subjectively in our cognition. For example, ancient Romans counted one summer hour longer than one winter hour.\textsuperscript{41} A similar situation of adjusting the length of the hour dynamically, according to the seasons, existed in ancient Japan.\textsuperscript{42} From Rome to Japan, authorities perceived time in the way of life and modified its measurement to turn it into a subjective tool. “Hour” is a kind of unit, like meter, which should be constant and independent from outside variances. As shown by the lack of consistency when parceling out time into units, time can be manipulated by humans. As a result, time became not only a resource to be consumed in everyday life, but also an element of

\textsuperscript{40} Lewis Mumford, \textit{Techniques and Civilization} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 14.
\textsuperscript{42} Blaise, \textit{Time Lord}, 94.
political or sociological structures. The locomotives took away moments from their passengers’ lives as they progressed on their journey, which only further enhanced the strangeness of time and space. Meanwhile, advanced time-keeping techniques reduced the dimension of time and sculptured the perception of time from a moment into an abstract scale.

At around AD 1300, the first mechanical clock was invented. A century and a half later, we see the invention of mechanical watches.\(^\text{43}\) The accuracy of these devices improved over the centuries. In the meantime, the size and expenses associating with timekeeping devices shrunk. Between 1807 and 1810, Eli Terry, an American clock maker, designed clocks that were affordable for almost everyone.\(^\text{44}\) After 1967, humankind was able to use atomic clocks to calculate time ranging from ten to fifteen million years to $10^{-44}$ seconds.\(^\text{45}\) As we succeeded in tying time to objective motion trajectory, visualizing the intangible process of time into a straightforward length, we were also alienating our everyday lives from the timeline. The ancient Roman hour-counting system would not work nowadays since one cannot question universal time, which is calculated according to the earth’s rotation, instead of the length of a day.

The development of timekeeping technology also affected power entities. Time played an important role in the political hierarchies. In the Chinese feudal society, each king named the years of his/her term of service after the emperor’s title, combined with a number that counted the years since he/she ascended to power.\(^\text{46}\) In the earlier stages of clock making in Europe, except for economic activities, such as navigation, clocks were mainly constructed for use by


\(^{45}\) Nowotny, *Time*, 17.

\(^{46}\) Blaise, *Time Lord*, 22.
royalty and the church. In Jean-François Millet’s *L’Angélus* (fig. 4), a peasant couple stands together in the field, praying. They heard the bells from the church in the distance. As factories began to produce affordable clocks for the masses, the reliance on public timekeeping devices, such as church bells, diminished. Because watches and clocks became omnipresent, people were tied together by a new invisible bond: time.

Fig. 4. Jean-François Millet, *L’Angélus*, 1857-1859, oil on canvas, 55.5 cm × 66 cm. Quai d’Orsay Museum, Paris.

2.4. Railways and the Timekeeping System

Railways kindled the confusion and conflict between standard time and local time, between practical and divine time, and between industrial and natural time. When asking what time it is, people in the second half of the nineteenth century, were asking *what time really was*. When fighting over who got to regulate time, they began to question the ultimate being of time.

By the nineteenth century, many larger cities in Europe and North America had their own astronomical observatories, which provided local mean time for surrounding towns. The famous Greenwich Observatory, founded by the British royal family, opened in 1676. Surveyors in this observatory calculated time by celestial observation in accordance with longitude.\(^47\) In 1833, the observatory installed a time-ball in the dock of Greenwich, which was then presented as the first

\(^{47}\) Howse, *Greenwich Time and the Discovery of the Longitude*, 32.
regular public time-signal in the world. Thanks to its crucial location, ships running up the Thames River were able to adjust their time based on the Greenwich time.\textsuperscript{48} By 1847, most main railways nearby accepted Greenwich mean time, which made some surrounding cities replace their local time with Greenwich time.\textsuperscript{49} Ever since then, Greenwich time became no longer only the local time to Greenwich, but also the standard time in the neighboring areas. Similarly, McGill in Canada and Boston in the U.S. also set up their own observatories. These observatories were financed by providing time service for railway companies, local governments, and jewelry stores.\textsuperscript{50} The development of the timekeeping system, in synergy with the expanding railway system, brought confusion and debate, along with convenience. For example, the entire route of the Pennsylvania Railroad kept Philadelphia time, the local time of where the company’s headquarters were located. If a passenger hopped on the train from Philadelphia to go to Buffalo for an appointment, transferring in Pittsburg, he or she would better keep in mind the local time of these cities and the standard time of the railway.\textsuperscript{51} In this case, different time was indicated on different clocks, which nonetheless reflected the same moment. The consolidated railway annual brochures provided a means to convert time in between different cities and railways. The confusion, however, only highlighted the growing importance of the concept of simultaneity.

The fresh experience of simultaneity was nonetheless inspiring. A precondition for such an experience was not only a united time system, but also the means of constant communication. More and more, the world began to be connected and humans began to understand the worldwide

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 79. \\
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 106. \\
\textsuperscript{50} Thomson, \textit{The Beginning of Long Dash}, 8. \\
\textsuperscript{51} Blaise, \textit{Time Lord}, 70.
simultaneity. However, de Chirico was not too keen on this connection when he noticed the illusion of simultaneity. He tried to gain “temporal sovereignty” from this very integrated world-wide simultaneity.52

![Image of The Enigma of the Hour](image)

Fig. 5. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Enigma of the Hour*, 1911, oil on canvas, 54.61 cm × 71.12 cm. Private collection.

In the painting *The Enigma of the Hour* (fig. 5) from 1911, de Chirico raised questions of simultaneity. In this painting, a clock is hanging on the façade of a stern building. In front of the building, there is a small pool with a fountain. Close to the fountain, one can see two figures, one in light, the other in shadow. On the second floor, there seems to be a third person. The general composition and appearance of this painting is in accordance with other metaphysical paintings by de Chirico – brownish colors with a greenish undertone are rendered with muted texture, while a stark contrast between light and shadow adds to the sense of mystery, melancholy, and anxiety.

As the title indicates, the painting illustrates the enigma of the time, which is manifest in the moment shared by the three witnesses, who each may experience this moment differently.

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Although the figures, building, and the small pool are there in the same moment in time, probably at 2:55 in the afternoon, they seem to be in different worlds and have no interaction with each other. The lack of communication between the characters is common to most de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings. Some of his metaphysical paintings might portray two figures shaking hands, as seen in the Piazza d’Italia (fig. 2). But because of their blurred faces and their repetitive appearance in other paintings, this pair exist as something like a symbol rather than actual living individuals. Similarly, in The Enigma of the Hour, the three figures not only have no visible interactions, but are also distanced and blurred. Notably, the back of the figure standing in the light resembles the figure from Arnold Böcklin’s Island of the Dead (fig. 6) from 1880 and 1883, and Odysseus und Kalypso from 1883. This figure also found its place in two other de Chirico Enigma paintings: The Enigma of the Oracle from 1910 and The Enigma of the Arrival and the Afternoon from 1912.53 De Chirico liked Böcklin’s works for two reasons. One reason was the muted atmosphere, which yielded delicate images which are filled with metaphors and in-depth melancholy. Another sphere taps into a deeper understanding that goes beyond the surface, which could only be perceived through diligent reading of the pictorial content. According to de Chirico, “an understanding of pictorial content, perception of the infinite mystery of such quality,” which is the second reason of de Chirico’s appreciation for Böcklin, weighs more than the first – “poetic, curious, strange and surprising” qualities are narrated by the special mood of the paintings. 54

53 Soby, Giorgio De Chirico, 26.
54 De Chirico, The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico, 52.
Fig. 6. Arnold Böcklin, *Island of the Dead (Basel Version)*, 1880, oil on canvas, 110.9 cm × 156.4 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel.

Fig. 7. Arnold Böcklin, *Odysseus und Kalypso*, 1883, oil on canvas, 104 cm × 150 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, Basel.

In Böcklin’s picture, a silhouette appeared as Odysseus in *Odysseus und Kalypso* (fig. 7), where it represents the steady, yet lonely man whose mind is conjoined with that of his faraway wife. The gesture is clear by meant as a signal of refusal to Kalypso. The way in which the protagonist is looking towards the sea also indicates him missing his wife. The determined, yet
lonely characteristics are even more vivid in the *Island of the Dead* (fig. 6), as the figure clothed in white stands on a boat with his arms held close to the body, facing in the direction of the island of despair. In *Enigma of the Hour*, the sense of tragedy was undermined but the sense of melancholy and loss, which were reinforced by gestures, dark silhouette and introspective body language. The two other figures, although different in outline, look both gloomy and generic. When looking at the three figures surrounding the clock in the *Enigma of the Hour*, eluding sign any of mutual acknowledgement, one finds only ruthless distance between them. As a result, de Chirico’s melancholic suspicion on simultaneity comes into shape in this picture.

De Chirico’s complex relationship with simultaneity has roots in his childhood. Later, he would describe an episode of a Greek festival scene. He did not talk much about the festival itself. Instead, what struck him most was the phenomenon of non-simultaneity inherent in the perception of what was supposedly one action.

White globes, like clouds which had fallen down on to the earth, rolled round a little, then broke up and faded away against the side of the hill. The explosion was heard shortly afterwards and made the window-panes shake slightly. This fact of seeing the flash first and then hearing the sound afterwards made a great impression on me. Later I knew the reasons for it, but even today I am still slightly impressed when I watch a gun being fired a long way off, seeing the flash first and hearing the report later.  

Although he later understood the reason for this phenomenon—the difference between the speeds of sound and light, he still would be “slightly impressed” by the event after having grown up. The slim gap between the optical and auditory stimulations sharpened de Chirico’s awareness between the muted objects and the sense of otherworldness. For example, when talking about his paintings on “objects and inanimate things,” he refused to use the common

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55 Ibid., 15.  
56 Ibid.
phrase “still life,” but insisted on “silent life.” By naming the arrangements of objects “silent life,” de Chirico, it seems, could have secured the objects from undesirable disturbance. He consciously secluded muted, silenced beings into another world, a world which could be isolated from the disasters of contemporary reality. Similarly, he portrayed a silenced scene in his novel *Hebdomeros*.

For that matter, the scene before them really did have an underwater quality to it. It reminded one of large aquaria, if only on account of the diffused light which eliminated all the shadows. A strange, inexplicable silence lay over the whole scene: that pianist sitting at his instrument and playing without making a sound, that pianist you didn’t really see, as there was nothing about him that deserved to be seen, and those characters out of a drama, moving around the piano with cups of coffee in their hands, making the gestures and movements of athletes jumping in slow-motion films; all these people lived in a world of their own, a world apart; they know nothing about anything; they had never heard of the war in the Transvaal or the disaster in Martinique; they did not recognize you, for they had never met you; nothing could disturb them or have any hold over them, neither prussic acid nor a stiletto nor an armor-piercing bullet [...] Hebdomeros held that it was the effect of the environment, of the atmosphere, and he knew no way of altering anything about it; the only thing he knew was to live and let live. But – that is the question – were they still alive?

In this paragraph, de Chirico presented an ideal scene of a gathering of friends, with piano and coffee. Everything within that world could not be disturbed by the outside chaos, no matter the characters, the on-going movements, or the unheard music. The outside chaos, as de Chirico insisted, could be the war in Transvaal or the disaster in Martinique; it could be the “prussic acid,” the “stiletto,” or an “armor-piercing bullet.” These two distinct worlds appeared together in a more realistic manner in de Chirico’s *Memoirs*. He mentioned how he was deeply touched by the beauty of Volos. “Never in other countries afterwards did I see a mirror of water so beautiful” said de Chirico, “they (the beautiful views) can only be imagined.” Yet, right after

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57 Ibid., 41-2.
this beautiful memory, the 1897 war between the Greeks and the Ottoman Turks broke out. During the war, he witnessed “sights full of fear, anguish, piety, and suffering.” He saw how soldiers participated the war with enthusiasm in the beginning and saw cities of refugees in panic when they began to falter.\textsuperscript{60} Fortunately, in reality, unlike Hebdomeros who cannot hear the music or engage the conversation in the “large aquaria,” de Chirico could enjoy the beauty of dream-like Greece. Unfortunately, the war in Greece in 1879, as well as the following two world wars, cast the sublime sceneries in Greece in disdain.

Based on de Chirico’s hope and imagination of “a world apart,” the enigmatic quality of his paintings would be easier to understand. In \textit{The Enigma of the Hour} (fig. 5,) what we see could be that “world apart,” where tranquility persevered. In the same sense, every character in this picture could also live only in a world that is isolated from anything and anyone surrounding the artist. Hebdomeros and the pianist could be any two figures in the painting \textit{The Enigma of the Hour}. The viewer or reader sees them together, both in space and in time. But they are not together, for they are not in the same world. The connection brought by simultaneity is too weak to enable any communication between the two. As for the painting, one cannot even know if these characters really exist in this space: Does the figure in the foreground really stand by the fountain? Does the figure in the arcade really walk in the front of the first figure? De Chirico proposed the question of whether Hebdomeros and the pianist were alive in the end. What he meant to allude to was the existence of the absolute will, which resides only in the dimension of time.

Another example of his emphasis on a world beyond concrete reality is his great attention on death memories. In his short \textit{Memoirs}, he portrayed at least four unexpected deaths: two

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
concerned his parents, one was a story he heard from his friend, and one was the demise of his beloved dog. In the four stories, he emphasized the simultaneous mental reactions. For example, on the very morning when his father passed away, de Chirico went for an errand to a distant district. All of a sudden, he saw “a flash of darkness in the bright light,” and felt “anguish and a terrible presentiment.” Then he began to run back immediately and only found out that his father had just passed away. No one can tell the exact moment when de Chirico’s father died, or the instant when de Chirico felt the presentiment. Simultaneity thus did not work for him on this occasion. Instead, de Chirico and his father were connected, at least according to son, by an unexplainable intuition.

Hebdomeros and the pianist seemingly appeared in the same time and in the same place, whereas they existed in two separated worlds and shared no connections with each other. On the contrary, de Chirico could feel his passed-away mother, father and dog, at the moment of their dying, even though it was hard to determine the exact hour or minute of that connection because they were in different locations. Such comparison highlights his doubt about the idea of simultaneity and therefore leads to doubts about one’s relationship with time.

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61 De Chirico, The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico, 47.
Chapter 3. The Illusion of Progress

The sense of connection, which was brought about by simultaneity, encouraged collective efforts in industry. As a result of such collective efforts, aided by new technologies, societies were able to achieve groundbreaking projects, such as the Eiffel Tower in Paris, constructed from 1887 to 1889. Gradually, the passion for the tower of babel transferred time from an individual’s possession into a social resource, which in turn further encouraged several nations’ enthusiasms for accomplishing something faster, stronger, and unprecedented.

3.1. Individual’s Time versus Collective Time

Time, in the earlier stages of industrialization, was associated more with the benefits of an individual. The first industrial revolution, which happened in England, led to a new era of production and promoted industriousness as a moral virtue amongst citizens. British playwright and essayist, Johnson Samuel, thought that only meaningful work could “redeem time from the danger of being unprofitably spent,” and “anchor the present moment and rescue time from dissolving into nothingness.” Time, in this case, was spent, instead of being passed. Johnson Samuel equated the amount of spent time to not only the literary work he could produce, but also to the extent to which he could grasp the present. Hogarth’s *Idleness and Industry* (fig. 8) is an epitome of the lower class’s view of this morality. Hogarth tells a story of two apprentices with diametrically opposed attitudes towards the morality of industriousness. One apprentice was diligent and industrious, the other one was insouciant and idle. At the end of the story, the industrious one became rich, and was elected as the mayor of London. The idle man committed crimes and was eventually executed at Tyburn. These fortunes and misfortunes seem to derive

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63 Ibid., 55-66.
solely from industry and idleness. Hardwork, as a result, became something that could best be redeemed by cash and was tightly associated with an individual’s happiness.

Fig. 8. William Hogarth, *Industry and Idleness, Plate 12: The Industrious 'Prentice Lord-Mayor of London*. 1747, etching and engraving, third state of three, 26.4 × 39.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Such legends were only reinforced in the coming ages. Nineteenth-century industries made changes in management in order to achieve better productivity with lesser cost. A typical method would be Taylorism, which originated in America and still remains influential in the manufacturing industry today. Taylorism, also called Scientific Management, was developed by an American chemical engineer, Frederic Winslow Taylor, in the 1880s. Taylorism was famous for reinforced labor division and systematic production lines. Now, not only time, but also workers themselves became part of industry resources. The effects of this method were tangible: in the early twentieth century, “French autos were produced in 300 man-days, compared with the 70 man-days of the American car.”64 At this point of time, an individual’s time was pooled

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together by the factory for the benefit of industry’s productivity, as well as for winning the race between nation states. For both factories and nation states, the goal was to be ahead of one’s competition and to be on the cutting edge of one’s age. Through the maximum utilization of collective time, societies were marching towards future. Fredrich Nietzsche explained the dynamic relationship between the pursuit of the future and the resources that structure a society as follows: “Assuming the wealth of force were greater, one could imagine forces being subtracted, not to serve the needs of society but some future need.” The redistribution of time resources is an epitome of Nietzsche’s substraction of forces.

3.2. Looking into Future

An important witness to the trend of the exploration of the future was time-travel literature, which H. G. Wells initiated with his book *Time Machine*. In this novel, he made assumptions about what would happen if a fourth dimension existed. The gesture of looking forward into the future by means of technology, with a passion for machines, inspired authors of his time and in later ages. Visual artists, on the other hand, were not satisfied with imagining the future and wanted to be avant-garde, as if they would stand on the edge of the immediate future. As early as 1886, Félix Fénéon categorized Seurat, Signac, and Pissaro as the avant-garde of the Impressionists featured in the last exhibition of the artists’ group. This was the debut of the word “avant-garde” in an art context. Here, Fénéon applied this word to distinguish the Pointillists from previous artists and to create an impression that the Pointillists were the artists of the near future. In early 1920s, Breton praised Picabia to be the first one who was able “to paint the earth blue and the sky red.” When highlighting such little details as color as

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67 Ibid., 79.
unprecedented inventions, Breton was concerned with the element of surprise and less with the artworks themselves.

When it comes to the antithetical opposition between future and past, between avant-garde and academic art, futurism always stands out as the most “advanced” movement. Futurists wrote many manifestos, in which the principles shifted slightly over time. But their passion for the future was perpetual. The first version of the Futurist manifesto, written by Filippo Tommaso Emilio Marinetti, founder of the movement, was published in 1909 in France. As explained by Luciano Folgore, a futurist poet and dramatist, futurism was not “une école” but “une tendance.” Futurists thought that the larger picture of society was lurking behind their commentaries on art.

The Futurist manifestos, outlined two sets of dominant antitheses. One pair was the antithesis between the younger/stronger and the older/weaker. The younger and the stronger were the main forces of Marinetti’s imagined society. They not only have the ability to accomplish their work, but they are also called upon to vandalize what has been created before as well as to go after the generation before them, whose mission was accomplished when they were young and strong. “The oldest of us is thirty: so we have at least a decade for finishing our work. When we are forty, other younger and stronger men will probably throw us in the wastebasket like useless manuscripts—we want it to happen!” said Marinetti. From this sentence, one gleans that, for Marinetti, the young and strong did not accomplish their undertakings for their own sake. They were willing to be abandoned instead of becoming a burden of society, since they were not able to create social value in the process. They deliberately sought to degrade

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themselves to social resources or consumables, only to get closer to this seemingly better future. Their ideal society would neglect justice and screen the weak. Art, from their vantage point, was an epitome of a society which “can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice.” Art or society thus does not honor the strong and the young. Instead, the strong and the young are like the weak and the old, when they serve as social resources to be sacrificed for the sake of the greater good. This greater good is the promising future.

The method for approaching the future was to abandon the past. Future and past represented the new and the old in the second antithesis. “We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind.” Museums, libraries, and academies are institutions which functions as symbols for traditions; the greatness of human history. By vandalizing these institutions, the Futurists expressed their rejection of the past. By negating the past when pursuing future, the Futurists set up a dichotomy between future and past. The sharp opposition left the present in a precarious status, since the boundary between present and past was blurred.

Because modernists sided with the new, they automatically regarded anti-modernist as the representative of the other side, those who remained in the old. When de Chirico was originally received by the Parisian art world, his works were welcomed for their dream-like settings, which influenced Surrealism. André Breton, one of the founders of Surrealism, showed interests in the symbolic and mysterious visual elements in de Chirico’s paintings. “With the certainty that nothing is incomprehensible and that everything, if need be, can serve as a symbol, we are spending the treasures of imagination […] I believe that a veritable modern mythology is

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70 Ibid., 293.
71 Ibid., 291.
being formed. It falls to Giorgio de Chirico to fix it indelibly in our memory.”72 Such euphoric outbursts exemplify what modernists in Paris thought about de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings. Numerous critics wrote about de Chirico and dwelled on the mysterious and dreamlike quality of his painting. Louis Vauxcelles, the French art critic, described de Chirico’s Enigma of the Oracle and Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon as paintings “brimming with mystery and melancholy.”73 After de Chirico devoted himself to the “return to order” movement, the metaphysical visual language began to vanish from his paintings, and his old friends in the Parisian modern art world began to disdain his later works. Louis Vauxcelles published several books on modern art since 1915, yet none of them mentioned de Chirico.74 Breton compared de Chirico’s metaphysical painting to a woman’s “youthful bloom,” which could only last for a short period of time, and included de Chirico with a selection of cases of “individual failure.”75 As a response to these commentaries, de Chirico thought no one understood him.76 The Surrealists and the art critics favorable to modernism saw only the difference in visual languages between his return to order works and his metaphysical paintings, but neglected to account for de Chirico’s perpetual pursuit of eternity.

74 Ibid., 651.
3.3. Mystery and Melancholy of a Street

Fig. 9. Giorgio de Chirico, *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, 1914, oil on canvas, 85 x 69 cm. Private collection.

He could do so because 1914 was the peak of de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings. It 1914, de Chirico painted *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (fig. 9). In this picture, the girl, the only live character in the composition, is trundling a hoop with a stick. Along the arcades on the right, there stands an empty wagon. In the background, a male statue with a pole casts long, melancholic shadow.

Arcades, statues, stark shadows, and muted colors, are the elements common by shared across de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings. Together, they define his sense of immobility. However, in *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, there is a girl running into the picture, which is unique amongst de Chirico’s metaphysical works. She is playing the hoop game. The origins of the hoop game can be traced back to ancient Egypt, but it could also be found in Greece.77 The game is about how to keep the hoop running without letting it fall down. The longer the player can

keep the hoop spinning, the better. There is no end to this game. It used to be an allegory of vanity for its meaningless movement; it was regarded as a sign of elegance since it required great skill of balancing; it was a metaphor of childhood for it used to be a child’s game; it was even seen as a metaphor of death. Overall, it has been a game that is rich in social symbolism. Arguably, de Chirico’s portrayal of the girl playing the hoop could also be a metaphor for a deeper connotation. What de Chirico wanted to say might have been similar to the message of a poem written by a seventeenth-century Dutch writer Joost van den Vondel:

She drove, followed by a zealous troop
The clanging hoop
Through the streets.

This poem was dedicated to the poet’s dead daughter. Rolling a hoop is a metaphor of death in this poem as the girl falls into the rhythm of permanent, meaningless, and repetitive movements. Whether the girl with the hoop in de Chirico’s painting stands for death remains a mystery. But de Chirico did have a sister, who passed away when de Chirico was only three years old. Although he did not recall anything from that sad moment, he did conjured up the look of his sister’s appearance in his novel Hebdomeros.

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…”

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78 Ibid., 98.
79 Ibid.
81 De Chirico, Hebdomeros, 141.
In this paragraph, Hebdomeros’ sister made him think about her life, death, and immortality, which indicates de Chirico’s own concern with his sister’s fate. *Hebdomeros* was first published in 1929, although many components of it had existed before its publication. 82 If the aforementioned paragraph was written later than 1914, the painting *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* stands out as a precursor to de Chirico’s thought on death and on his sister, or vice versa.

Death and hoop-rolling are both points of eternity. De Chirico’s idea of eternity might come from Fredrich Nietzsche, whose literary work he read ardently. One recurrent idea of Nietzsche was the eternal recurrence, which he conveyed through the figure of Zarathustra in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and which he discussed in the last part in his last book, *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche believes that in infinite time, every possibility will happen and every possibility will happen infinitely: the endless repetition indicates the eternal recurrence.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Zarathustra and a dwarf stand between two lanes when the they discuss the notion of eternal recurrence: “This moment! From the gateway, This moment, there runneth an eternal lane backwards: behind us lieth an eternity. Must not whatever can run its course of all things, have already run along that lane? Must not whatever can happen of all things have already happened, resulted, and gone by? […] For whatever can run its course of all things, also in this long lane outward – Must it once more run!” 83 Nietzsche conceived a metaphor about lanes, which could stand for the process of happening or becoming without a goal. In this process, every round of becoming should but resembles the section before and after it. The changes we experience in life are an illusion determined by the limited life-span of human beings.

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83 Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 102.
The assumption of eternal recurrence constitutes a pessimistic outlook on the relationship between both past and present, and present and future. In modernism, the time ahead of us contains a future that is better than that of the present. Thus, modernists tried their best to make changes come about in present time, in order to arrive at the better future. In opposition to the modernists, Nietzsche believed that progress was merely an illusion.

Progress. – Let us not be deceived! Time marches forward; we’d like to believe that everything that is in it also marches forward – that the development is one that moves forward. The most level-headed are led astray by this illusion. But the nineteenth century does not represent progress over the sixteenth; and the German spirit of 1888 represents a regress from the German spirit of 1788.  

There are certainly differences between the nineteenth and sixteenth centuries, but they do not necessarily represent progress. Instead, one aspect might seem superior while another aspect might show regression. The analysis of the relationship between past and present, present and future was typical for de Chirico’s thought. On the one hand, he fully enjoyed the progress of technology and the honor that came with his father’s position as an engineer. On the other hand, he could not bear the way modern artists painted. He was disappointed by the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, accusing the students in this art school to abandon tradition and to ignore how to hold a pencil. To him, no matter whether there was any progress in society or not, the art world was definitely suffering from a severe decadence. He believed that, as the dictatorship of modernism weakened by the middle of the twentieth century, the taste for classical aesthetics would eventually regain the upper hand.

As the art world kept evolving without a sense of direction, so the hoop controlled by the girl was spinning endlessly. In the painting Mystery and Melancholy of a Street, the hoop-rolling

84 Nietzsche, The Will to Power, 55.
game indicates the pessimistic eternal recurrence, tinged with a shade of melancholy, which is cast by death.

According to de Chirico, the decadence of art manifested itself in several dimensions. Firstly, modern artists abandoned the traditional techniques and academic standards for good art. As a result, audiences lost their ability to find beauty in good pictures, while spectators could only be amused by the narrative of an image; artists were no longer capable of producing anything genuine and enjoyable, but cared only to paint something more “interesting.” Artists and critics who began to pursue spirituality in painting diminished the hurdle for being an artist down to zero – a patient who suffers from mental disorder could easily “out-Picasso” the real Picasso.86

Did de Chirico ever give up the classical tradition? Did de Chirico fall prey to the despair of making interesting images? Did de Chirico ever try to let his pure spirituality take control of his mind and his artist’s hands? No, he kept himself clean from these modernist traps since his first attempts at drawing. The French art critic Maurice Raynal gave a relatively precise review of Giorgio de Chirico in 1913. Raynal thought de Chirico believed in Baudelaire’s motto that “poncif est le génie.”87 “Poncif” was not the trite dogma of yesterday, but, like ancient architecture, was the heritage from the repetitiveness of endless yesterdays.

When talking about how de Chirico dealt with the relationship between present, future, and past, Raynal was very careful and said: “C’est ainsi qu’il a pu concilier en même temps l’amour du présent et celui du passé et les mèler pour en tirer de sages impressions, trop sages,

peut-être." In this sentence, Raynal did not mention the future, because de Chirico indeed showed little concern in his paintings in exploring future. Instead, Raynal emphasized de Chirico’s love for present and past. If one look from the perspective of Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, what de Chirico loved was not present or past, but the “poncif” that resides in time. The “poncif,” in art, would be the classical tradition, which pervades everything from how to sharpen a pencil beautifully to how to make a masterpiece on which not only the eye could feast, but which the mind could find its fulfillment as well.

88 Ibid.
Bibliography


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