

## DESECRATED REALITY\*

*Giorgio de Chirico*

Reality is another concept the significance of which has been completely disfigured by the dishonest and stupid spirit of our age. Today reality is a word that man hears too often and sees written at random; but we must go back to the origin of this dangerous disfigurement. At the beginning of the century according to the opinion of the intellectual avant-garde (which has been so often the cradle of future misfortune) reality became a synonym of mediocrity and banality. Thus started the battle against the conception of reality, especially in art. We must say at once that reality in general has nothing to do with art but at most only with the subject represented in a work of art. Naturally the existence or not of a relation between the subject of a work and reality, is not important to the phenomenon of art itself. A realistic subject can neither confer nor deprive a work of artistic value. Flemish paintings are indisputably works of art certainly not because the figures, objects, interiors, etc. are painted in a realistic manner. These pictures are great works of art for another reason and precisely for their remarkable painterly quality. How did this foolish contempt for reality, this complete disowning of the part it plays in art begin? Contempt for reality is in fact one of the characteristic sentiments of our epoch. The explanation of the negative attitude toward reality assumed by artistic and intellectual groups since the early years of our century and which is ever more accentuated, is simple enough. The chief factor that brought this about was the absence of great artists at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, that is, at the dawn of the epoch of the "modern spirit"; the absence of artists, simply making art without preoccupations and discussions as to what tendencies their art should belong to, artists having strong enough talent and personality to be able to support "both the real and the unreal". After marking and stressing this first factor regarding the absence of genius which was so clearly manifest after the epoch of great talents in the last century; a second factor must be mentioned which is the tendency toward positive sciences,

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I mean the direction along which the progress of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was moving, the very strong interest felt for technical achievements, medicine, mechanics, briefly, the sciences in general, tending towards reality which serve above all the material needs of our life. The strong grip materialism had always exercised upon men provoked a reaction against reality in questions belonging to the elevated plane of the spirit.

Without any doubt the discourses and discussions about reality quickly deprived reality of its true significance, as reality is a very delicate and instable phenomenon that is difficult to handle. One must remember that reality is bound to all the manifestations time, the past, the present and also the future. I can even say that it is formed by these three manifestations of time. Thus reality is a strange phenomenon, which though it is temporal, at the same time and in a certain sense it is enclosed in eternity; to the same degree, reality is at one with truth. And then, reality has many different aspects corresponding to the many and diverse mentalities and individuals.

But the many aspects of reality must not lead us to forget prudence in our opinions on its relativity for there is the relativity of the situations and the life of men, reality as taken in its principal lines. But the reality of the truth is concrete and is the most important for us. This is the reality of wisdom, and since wisdom is always the same, it has managed to conceive over course of the centuries a reality that corresponds to truth, a reality deriving from various situations and corresponding to the sentiments and opinions of reasonable men of all times. This reality must never be forgotten, and the disfigurement of its significance must never be allowed. And yet today we stand before the accomplished fact. Reality has become invisible to the majority of men; the deplorable spirit of our time has totally deprived men of clarity of opinion and has caused them to forget even the notion of that which used to be the real conception of reality.

So then, what is the idea of reality for modern man? Of that reality, the clear comprehension of which requires wisdom, logic, experience and foresight? What is this complex factor called reality that includes in itself the past and the future, which determines in the present just and necessary action? For modern man it is nothing for he does not know reality. Today, in spite of an extreme need for action, we find ourselves in the dramatic situation of having to learn a-new the significance of the word reality in order to familiarise ourselves again with the very idea of reality as it was known to our ancestors. Our century had from the beginning a mania for cleverness, founding a cult for what seemed intelligence and ignoring the respect of truth, the veneration of real values, in short, it ignored the concrete things that are the "reality of the spirit".

The mania for cleverness formed a fog in which art in all its manifestations would be enclosed. Thus was born the legend that a great work of art in our age must be incomprehensible. Our age presumptuously considers itself as having reached the culminating point of spiritual power. In such a way, reality which is exclusively a stable and evident value, was voluntarily eliminated from art by leaders of the so-called modern movement who considered this reality as non-existent. The saving legend justifying everything, calming the restless, passed from mouth to mouth; the intellectuals hurried to say that time and distance were necessary to understand the greatness of a work of art too elevated for the spirit of their contemporaries. No one dared to fight this absurd opinion and

cry out: “No, a work of art – remember this – to reveal itself needs neither days, nor centuries, nor distance, nor time; art is always evident for its value is a reality of the spirit, that is, of something existent, concrete and verifiable; only you, men who have forgotten the existence of reality, can believe in the relativity of its value. You, adorers of cleverness and destroyers of reality, you can now raze your sanctuaries to the ground and look for another God, since your intelligence cannot even tell you the difference between rubbish and a work of art”.

No one raised a voice in defence of reality both in life and art. False intellectuals having disclaimed truth considering it fallen, tried to expel it from all manifestations of the spirit and now these false intellectuals of our unfortunate epoch fill themselves with doubtful metaphysics, with surrealism and “mystery” made to measure for them, which naturally has nothing to do with metaphysics, the surreal and mystery. Now reality, repudiated in name of modern spirit, has hidden itself from the eyes of men in their day of need. Now men are feeling their way amid chaos incapable of changing or accomplishing anything, subject as they are, to desecrated reality’s just revenge.

For a long time reality has no longer guided men in their actions and intentions. Dictatorships have used the world reality to turn away their people from truth, from urgent problems, from the real political, economical and social situation of the world. Political personalities in their speeches and propaganda used the world reality for their rhetoric, calling reality that what they would invent for their own convenience without fearing the ridiculous or the absurd.

It had become the norm to use the word reality when it was necessary to confuse issues, causing people to be ignorant of what reasonable men according to their logic had always termed reality. Political men of modern times naturally dared to misuse the word reality in such a shameless manner “because the ground had been very well prepared by the intellectuals”.

Without the unlimited contempt which the spirit of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had shown to reality, even the most presumptuous politicians would never have found in themselves the impertinence and the impudence necessary for serving out such lies to their people and even to the whole world. But it is useless to speak of the past; we must especially speak of the present. Looking carefully around us we can easily perceive that the very notion of reality having disappeared from the brains of our contemporaries, the privilege granted to men to form for themselves a representation of the world does not exist for them. For modern men a representation of the universe, *Weltanschauung*, had simply been replaced by chaos, for real chaos is now dominant both in life and in the minds of men. Never in the whole course of history have there been more difficult times, yet in any age one could have found more easily than now men capable of coping with the disastrous state of things. The mentality of the moment consists of a total lack of the sense of responsibility and duty; everyone is preoccupied solely with narrowly personal interests, consequently it is impossible to feel even the slightest idealism whatsoever. This is the basic state of soul of our contemporaries, surrounded by the rhetoric of interminable discussions and discourses, the lifeless talk of spare time, when one is not taken up with making a good position for oneself under the sun, which naturally everyone does within the limits of his field and possibilities.

This without any doubt is the European mentality. In Europe we see now, in these terrible times, either men running around in search of important positions or bewildering themselves with theo-

retic and sterile discussions without a thought for real and immediate needs and incapable of accomplishing the smallest useful action.

This applies to art as well as to politics.

But reality even when invisible to men, exists, and mercilessly awaits its hour.

An intelligent man understands that reality, so dangerous by nature, has been left too long alone, unwatched; he knows that this ignoring of reality has caused a wide spreading of evil and he trembles in thinking of the fatal moment when evil will have reached its culminating point and the calamity will be great.

So great will the calamity be that reality will appear – in and of itself – before all once again and all will have to recognise it.