

THE METAPHYSICS OF CHILDHOOD

Children in the art of Carrà and DeChirico

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I. Introduction

Now that I have had another look at the title I gave Ian (Dr Davidson) some months ago, I notice that my initial ideas for this lecture have moved beyond a commentary on children in the work of Carrà and De Chirico. Perhaps the subtitle 'Children in the art of Carrà and De Chirico' should now read as 'A reflection on art's definition of childhood, as prompted by Carrà's *Antigrazioso (Bambina)* (1916) and De Chirico's *Il cervello del bambino* (1914)'.



Carlo Carrà *Antigrazioso (Bambina)* (1916)



Giorgio De Chirico, *Il cervello del bambino* (1914)

What prompted me in the first place to take on this lecture was a discussion over another paper that I gave in this University last May, entitled 'Modernity's Children: Rousseau's *L'enfant au polichinelle* (1903) and Carrà's *Ricordi d'Infanzia* (1916)' at the Scottish Word and Image Group's (SWIG) *9th Annual International Aberdeen Word and Image Conference*. After the Conference I discussed some aspects of images of childhood with Dr Davidson, after which he kindly invited me to collaborate with him on *The John Darling Lectures* by contributing a further paper (this one) almost as a continuation of the discussion raised by the May (SWIG) paper.

So what is this paper about?

As I have already indicated, the point of departure is the work of the Italian artist Carlo Carrà (1881-1966) — more precisely his painting *Antigrazioso (Bambina)* which he did in 1916 at a stage in his work that succeeds his Futurism with Metaphysical Art. Carrà's link with Metaphysical Art immediately implies the name of another artist — Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978). De Chirico's work often visits the issues of memory and life — i.e. the *memory of life* and *life as a series of memories*. De Chirico's work raises further questions around nostalgia, the meaning of space and place in the making of the psyche, and indeed the hidden segments of life, including childhood. Although the image of children does not appear as central to De Chirico's work, childhood is ever present — in disguise, so to speak — as the title *Il cervello del bambino* (*The child's brain*) suggests.

This is where the essay starts — from De Chirico and Carrà. Yet it does not stop there as it is intended to raise a wider critical discussion about the image of child and childhood, as well as that of learning and education.

II. Childhood as a formative grammar

The artistic context is very important here — as it also highlights other meanings to three key words: the *child*, the *image*, and what is termed as a *metaphysics* of childhood. Although philosophical in its tenure, I use the term metaphysics because I want to read the notion of childhood as a reminder that we all share childhood. We do this at two levels: at a personal level and on a universal level.

To take on the personal level of childhood first would only require a few seconds of reflection: **Like everyone else, I was an individual child:** the five, six, seven, eight year old, who lived at a specific address, and went to a particular school in a specific country. Like many (though not *every* child) I lived with both my parents. I also shared my childhood with a younger brother. My brother and I shared our childhood in our immediate family as well as a larger, wider, family of younger and older cousins. I also shared my childhood with other (unrelated) children: friends and school mates, children living in the same neighbourhood etc. As an adult I currently experience another individual level of childhood: I have a daughter with her own personal experience childhood which she shares with other children — be they relatives, friends, et cetera.

My childhood was one amongst millions of other children. This means several things about my individuality, but it also means that as an adult **I belong to a universal childhood.** We all recognise ourselves as a universal species that perceives within the experience and notion of childhood a common grammar of humanity (or perhaps the lack of it), by which individuals who are, or have been, children, share and continually construct a plurality of definitions of childhood. In their plurality these definitions may be disparate, but they also provide to all of us a common point of reference. We all know what childhood is, even when we have very different experiences of it.

When we speak '**of** childhood', we also '**speak** childhood'. We speak '**about** children', but we also speak '**as** children'. We do so by retaining a memory of childhood as a common ground, a kind of grammar that allows us to understand what it is to be a child. In this way childhood becomes 'metaphysical'. It denotes not just children (and perhaps here we may move away from children *per se*) but a state of mind and life that stays with us beyond childhood itself. The metaphysics of childhood is a grammar of memory. Beyond its chronological and developmental spatio-temporality, childhood is metaphysical by the sheer fact that it **remains**. Because it remains, it retains a language of Being that overcomes any limit by way of age, development or circumstance. Inversely, age, development and circumstance become other than personal, and enter the concern of us all as a human species.

As a mediator (or signifier) of a *human* community, childhood provides us with an infrastructure for the construction of a moral imagination, by which we judge and define a set of values, that in turn become central to issues of *formativity*. I say *formativity* and not *formation*, because I want to distinguish between a passive formation of knowledge (by accumulation and experience) and an ability and activity of formation — i.e. formativity — that is continuous and hence pertains to Being as well as knowledge. Formativity is ontological first, epistemological later. (In other words, it pertains to Being so as to become *knowable*.) As a process, learning as formativity indicates that first the learner *is*, after which the learner *knows*.

This distinction helps me, later on, to latch onto the notion of image as a making, and therefore an image as a form of knowledge that is made first by way of a relationship that provides a point of origin from within the self — i.e. as *Being*.

Formativity pertains to an ontological ground where we continuously inhabit and construct ethical spaces that provide an edifice of knowledge and within which we construct those values by which we move on and develop strategies for life in the form of learning. By inhabiting (and constructing) our spaces we learn *to be*. By *being*, we learn *to know*. The catalyst of formativity is the ground on which we assemble both space and knowledge.

The ancient Greek word for this ground (this edifice) of assembly was *agón* — which, etymologically is retained in the word of pedagogy. In ancient Greek, *agón* (and its derivatives *agônos* and *agonó*) denotes a series of meanings. (a) It means an assembly in the sense of both a meeting-place, as well as a place of combat. (b) It also implies a moving agent towards a legal dispute (as a *lawsuit*), which suggests other forms of intention such as exertion and struggle. In other words, the edifice for formativity within the meaning of the word 'pedagogy' is not entirely benign or straightforward. Formativity implies a negotiation of values and actions, where the experience of individual knowledge and the construction of social morality are not taken for granted. Pedagogy in this wider context implies a formative process that is fought for, and therefore sustained by the continuous construction (and reconstruction) of a plurality of narratives — whether they are legal, epistemological, ethical or aesthetical.

As derived and understood in terms of the Latinised word *pedagogía*, we often make of pedagogy a method of teaching the child. However we should keep in mind the notion of *agón* as foundational to the other Greek term *paidagogéo* — a term which, unfortunately, in English lost all meaning to the rather brutish notion of the *pedagogue*, when in effect it should pertain to that original notion of a leader (as *facilitator*). As understood in its Greek meaning, pedagogues facilitate a journey that takes place on the grounds of the same *agón* over which, as members of one human community, we share Being. If we keep in mind the notion of childhood as a metaphysical grammar by which we share Being, we could well argue that education implies an act of sharing Being on the universal grounds of childhood as a common origin.

This humanist notion of education has somehow been lost in the intricate (and intriguing) polity of language — particularly after the Enlightenment, when reason (and with it Education) has become either romanticized by the myth of the child's innocence, or else rationalised by the empirical certainties of Cartesian science. By the same token of forgetfulness, we have also forgotten another ancient concept of learning, which is related to the notion and definition of memory and — as Socrates tells us in Plato's *Phaedo* — to the notion of immortality.

While for obvious reasons the Socratic notion that learning is indicative of a recollection of an omniscience which the soul allegedly enjoyed before it was burdened by the toils of the body, may not sound attractive (or indeed effective) in our modern attempts to put up with the challenges of Curricular politics, I would like to think that this notion of learning remains — beyond its poetry — an effective guardian of what we are all about, as individuals that have an interest in the process of learning. Because after all, the whole notion of childhood does not pertain to education simply because we educate the younger generation. Rather, we have a direct interest in education because we all share a grammar of childhood that still gives us hope in a world that always presents us, in its factual state, with the loss and fragmentation of what (perhaps erroneously) we still claim to be 'good'.

Whether the idea of the 'good' is in itself defied by the very myth that sustained it in the first place, somehow childhood remains just about a tangible point of reference over which we could all claim a right to memory — whatever that may be. We are often told by child psychologists that childhood is a signifier of adulthood. If there is still place for the word 'essence' in our contemporary vocabulary, we might be correct to claim that childhood just about approximates a representation of what essence may be. Thanks to child studies, we also know that once the notion of 'the child' ceased to be that of a 'small adult'. We have restored for us (as adults) another dimension of understanding which, in all its aspects, enables us to converse with other than mere personal histories, and instead makes us aware — once more — of our claim to memory.

III. Carrà: Play and the delight of semblance

This is where I would suggest that we look at the two art-works that prompted this essay. As you can sense from the first part of this lecture, this is not an essay in art history. Rather it takes on art works as an argument for other than art — which after all, is what art is all about. Had art been made for its own sake, the art-form would not only lose the autonomy by which it claims a right to exist as form, but would also become subservient to non-art. For this reason I would urge us all, as an audience to art, to keep art's formal autonomy in mind while we discuss these

works. This again has nothing to do with useless reverence, but to the contrary, it pertains to the understanding of art within a context that historically has played up with its autonomy, giving it an apparent freedom where in effect it was subdued to other than freedom.

The autonomy of the image emerges from the desire (if not need) to be able to claim a ground by which we as human beings could claim the right to question, without the risk of either fallacy or self-righteousness, what we assume to be certain. In this way, art is neither good nor evil. Rather, art is a means by which we could absolve ourselves from the duties of language, and instead take on the needs of our 'formal' imagination — and thereby operate on grounds that would allow us to participate in what we so often refuse to understand or accept rationally.

To stop this argument going off into the realms of aesthetic theory (which is not the object of this essay) I would suggest that we pay due to the work as it is. As a work of art, this painting is a narrative that may or may not partake of our daily encounters with infinite numbers of images and representations by which we see and define our world. (But on the other hand, it may well do).

To start with, I want to take Carrà's *Antigrazioso* away from its historical context. But at the same time I want to keep in mind that it is a work of art that is marked by the scars of the failed utopia of Modernity, at a time when Europe was shattered by the trauma of the Great War. *Antigrazioso* is the image of a child. It is an ugly child, but it is an embodiment of childhood even when one is tempted to call it the depiction of a small adult. We know that it is not an image of a small adult. This is not simply because the other name for the painting is *Bambina* (Girl), but because the toy-like world that it inhabits suggests a jocular world — a world still to be discovered, or uncovered, by the usage of apparent toys, which may (indeed) suggest other than child play.

So rather than ascertain you that this is an image of a child, here I am contradicting myself by suggesting (rather than asserting) that the jocularity in this work retains a form of childhood but confuses the rest. But having confessed this uncertainty, I will hasten to add that indeed this is what makes this work fascinating. Fascinating, perhaps in the sense that it presents me with an equally curious (though perhaps bewildered) aspect (and definition) of childhood. It is bewildering and therefore attractive. It is archaic, yet remains fresh by dint of the audacity by which Carrà makes a statement that contradicts and rejects what he once stood for as a Futurist. But has he really rejected his Futurist utopianism? In this painting Carrà seems to become an *avant-nostalgic*, in the sense that he looks at the future with his face fixed on a series of narratives that are found in a particularly selected past — that of Giotto and Uccello.

This is opposed to his futurist youth, where he rejected the past as a matter of principle. Carrà's *Bambina* is a work of the avant-garde only insofar as it looks at the present with an eye on a future that is insecure and obscure. The girl is looking awkward because the present is

awkward and because the notion of the child is not simply a benign innocence that is very happy; but a tragedy that will come in adulthood, and is already instilled in the child.

Carrà's child is a candidate of play. It claims play as its right. Hence the toys around: the trumpet and the house. The toys are toys because they are jocular. They imply a game that art was now playing and claiming back as a right to life. Indeed, as Schiller argued in his 26th Aesthetic Letter:

And what are the outward and visible signs of the savage's entry upon humanity? If we inquire of history, however far back, we find that they are the same in all races which have emerged from the slavery of animal condition: delight in semblance, and a propensity to ornamentation and play (Schiller 1967: §26, pp. 192-3).

It may well be that Schiller's words would appear to the modern reader, as awkward — if not incorrect and slightly racist. At first glance he seems to be implying that the savage is the 'pre-civilized', indeed the pre-bourgeois, or even the non-Westerner. Yet on a closer reading, Schiller's comments gain correctness and truth — especially in the light of how historically, the aesthetic experience was an effective weapon in the struggle against racism. There is no doubt that the savagery of the white slave-owners was effectively confronted and ultimately beaten by the rise of literature and the arts within the enslaved African-American people. More to the point of Carrà's work, we see how in *Antigrazioso* the "delight in semblance", and the "propensity to ornamentation and play" rise from the debris of the savagery of the First World War.

Alas this did nothing to stop the savagery of Fascism or Stalinism, which some would argue, was prefigured in the Utopias of the avant-garde — of which the Futurist Carrà was once a member. Yet the delight in ornamentation and play once more survived the horrors of the ultimate savagery in Auschwitz ... some twenty-nine years after *Antigrazioso*, where composers continued to write music even when, as Adorno suggests, it was dubious whether after Auschwitz we could still write poetry. (cf. Adorno 1984: pp. 361ff.). (It still remains to be seen whether the most recent savagery of September the 11th could fit this line of inquiry. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the Taleban hated ornament, music and image to the extents of what they imposed during their regime in Afghanistan. Yet this does not absolve those other savageries happening elsewhere in world, where the instigators of terror are not necessarily iconoclasts of the Fundamentalist brand.)

The girl in *Antigrazioso* is by no means an innocent child. However the childhood by which Carrà reclaimed his delight in semblance, was sustained by the right to play. I would again refer to Schiller when he says that:

the only kind of semblance I am here concerned with is aesthetic semblance (which we distinguish from actuality and truth) and not logical semblance (which we confuse with these): semblance, therefore which we love just because it is semblance, and not because we take it to be something better. Only the first is play, whereas the latter is mere deception. (Schiller 1967: p. 193).

Here the line of Schiller's argument fits the notion of childhood in Carrà. Semblance and play are not utilities or instruments of change *per se*. They change and critique the world by absolving themselves from the structures of logical semblance, and by "possessing reality absolutely" they take a 'metaphysical' approach which Henri Bergson defines as "the science which claims to dispense with symbols". As Bergson puts it:

If there exists a means of possessing a reality absolutely, instead of knowing it relatively, of placing oneself within it instead of adopting points of view towards it, of having the intuition of it, instead of making the analysis of it, in short, of grasping it over and above all expression, translation or symbolical representation, metaphysics is that very means (Bergson, 1992: p. 162).

Carrà, like his futurist colleague Umberto Boccioni (who died in 1916), had a good knowledge of Bergson, and as a young futurist he aspired to grasp reality at one go, with works like *I Funerali dell'Anarchico Galli* (1911). Yet the metaphysics by which Bergson seems to approach the world, comes to a fuller — less literate — fruition in Carrà's post futurist works — especially in its immediate transition, as evident in his *Ricordi D'Infanzia* (1916).



Carlo Carrà, *I Funerali dell'Anarchico Galli* (1911)



Carlo Carrà, *Ricordi D'Infanzia* (1916)

Here the intuitive means of possessing reality becomes like Schiller's notion of aesthetic semblance, a form of absolute play, where play becomes synonymous with the moment of absolute intuition in Bergson's notion of "placing oneself within" reality without any use of symbol or translation.

Antigrazioso is a way in. We as an audience could see ourselves view the world through the eyes of the Girl. We are thus enabled to cast our eyes and delight in the ornament of a chequered floor and the play of a toy trumpet. The gaze by which we see the work becomes a gaze by which we are seen. We change roles with the work and become subject to it. We go on stage and the image becomes an audience. The role alters just as the image of a child alters the way we see the world. Somehow with childhood we become actors and are returned to childhood as if we ourselves become children once more — indeed, what and where is the proof that we have not remained children?

IV. De Chirico: Childhood, openness and interpretation

De Chirico's *Il cervello del bambino* takes the discussion of childhood onto another stretch of the horizon. Here I would like to refer to the beginning of this essay where I make reference to the notion of image as making, and how this making implies a definition of knowledge by way of a relationship between self and knowing, and thus between a point of origin (the I) and its extension into the world. The relationship between the I and its extension into the world — as

knowledge, as play, as beauty ... et cetera — is pretty much summed up in this painting. It is summed up at various levels of *interpretation* (and I would stress the word 'interpretation' because it is central to any story we may have to say about the world and how this builds up the notion of truth in its plurality). If I may, I would like to read childhood in De Chirico's work by tracing three instances on its horizon:

- 1) First is that of the painting as a *making* (i.e. as a process by which definitions pertain to an 'open work' that precludes the closure of meaning by, amongst other, an immediate world).
- 2) The second instance brings forth the mechanism (or method) of *interpretation*, where childhood provides a 'grammar' by which the words and stories told in the painting, make sense and allow us to read our own childhood within them.
- 3) Related to both instances, I would suggest that the painting provides us with an *openness* by which we would be able to partake of what De Chirico's metaphysical art offers — in terms of an ability to recognise and 'live with' (if not within) the enigmatic contexts by which men and women strive to construct meaning.

In terms of De Chirico's work (and to some extents also Carrà's), the horizon of art extends across making, interpretation and openness and continues to do so as long as we engage with it as an audience. However, we may well ask whether this horizon of openness, interpretation and making also extends to the notion of childhood, especially when De Chirico's work latches onto childhood not merely as a theme (a title or story), but instinctively by way of his metaphysical reading of the making of the psyche.

Il cervello del bambino has been interpreted as the embodiment of the journey between, in this case, the boy and his growing into a man. Psychoanalytical readings attribute various symbolic meanings to the objects that emerge within the painting. Whether that is a case or not is not the object of this essay. But surely the journey is of great importance, particularly if we were to take the horizon of openness, interpretation and making into the notion and definition of childhood within this painting.

Surely, the brain (*cervello*) of the child may or may not entirely equate with the mind (*mente*) of the child. This could be trivial at one level, but quite important at another level, especially if (as De Chirico insisted) Metaphysical art must be distinguished from Surrealism. The notion of a brain seems to imply a memory that is different from the subconscious. In De Chirico's work the narrative of memory is far more obvious (and accessible) than the narrative of the subconscious (as depicted by Surrealists like Dalí and Magritte). In De Chirico's work, the subconscious is there, but somehow the level of a memory that still tells stories that are 'in

control' of the story-teller is a more attractive (and effective) approach — because it seems to equate with (and in turn construct) one's own daily reality.



Giorgio De Chirico, *The Nostalgia Of The Infinite*

By this token, the openness that the Metaphysical art-form proposes to us (as a making), is more malleable and familiar. To this effect we are led into the making not just as an audience but also as makers of daily lives — almost as surrogate artists. There is in De Chirico's (as in Carrà's) work a quotidian (everyday) familiarity with his images even if the arrangement of familiar objects is often odd and 'surreal'. Yet the De Chirico's 'surrealism' stops short of being estranged from us, as we are always prompted with a notion of belonging whenever we engage with his work. This is especially tangible in his depiction (and use) of space. De Chirico's space is a possible one. We could well see ourselves inhabit his deserted squares, strolling by the many arcades that are so reminiscent of a Mediterranean landscape. On the other hand, Dalí's landscape — equally Mediterranean in origin — seems to reconfigure space in a way that we could only inhabit it in the mysteries of the unconscious.

To inhabit De Chirico's space is to inhabit one's own space. And this becomes more clear when we talk of childhood. The childhood of the man, and what emerges in the brain as memory is a space that has been inhabited by us as human beings — and more importantly as

individuals with a story to tell. Childhood is not a dream but a memory. And because childhood is memorial it allows for segments of interpretations by way of inhabiting it as a familiar space.

Childhood and its 'hidden' depiction in De Chirico also pertains to the enigma of life. This opens us (as once children) to the enigma of truth in a 'democratic' and formative way. By saying that truth is being opened to the enigma, one does not mean a deferral of truth to a noumenal eternity. Rather De Chirico offers us a plurality of truth that remains within one's grasp. Here, the enigma emerges as a form of reasoning that retains its humanist origin in most of its assumptions. And by being so, the ethical imagination by which we conduct ourselves and live out the enigmas of life, remain in our reach.

We reach out for the enigma and make it ours. We know that this is possible when we look at De Chirico's work, and even when we are not sure whether our interpretation is 'right'. Interpretation is open in itself and whether it is right or wrong — in this case — pertains to the rules we make for the appropriation of the enigma. Thus the enigma is part of a formative — and I dare say, pedagogic — terrain.

V. Childhood, like the enigma, is a gift

I would conclude by going back to the notion of *agón* as that meeting place over which we acquire a *facilitation* of knowledge. One could say that in De Chirico's and Carrà's spaces one finds a similar state of affairs. The space that is depicted at both the iconographic as well as the metaphorical levels of these paintings, is a gift. It is a gift because it provides the possibility of facilitation by sheer situation. This means that by us *being there* the space provides us with the event of knowledge. The gift is therefore two-fold: it operates as a facilitation of Being, which in turn becomes *formative of* a myriad bodies of knowledge. As a making De Chirico's space (De Chirico's *agón*) is signified by a latent childhood that in its familiar memory gives us the possibility and the means of appropriating the unfamiliar.

The delight in play and semblance are enhanced by an act of 'giving'. This giving emerges from childhood as the given of reality. As a given of reality, childhood emulates the metaphysical moment which — though apparently full of symbol — dispenses with description and instead places knowledge akin to what Bergson calls the "placing [of] oneself within it instead of adopting points of view towards it". To be placed requires an ability to 'be there' which is not merely 'found' but neither is it simply 'learnt'.

This is where we start to operate on enigmatic rules. De Chirico's and Carrà's narratives do not allow us to rely on assumed theories of knowledge or learning. Rather they request and prompt us to be critical of any accepted and assumed form of knowing. Perhaps unlike

philosophical notions of metaphysics, metaphysical art claims the right to take on the enigma as the givenness of truth, and by its familiar whereabouts we find our way into it rather than outside of it.

To think otherwise would defy what Schiller favours as aesthetic semblance (rather than logical semblance). With play as aesthetic semblance, we are urged to “love [it] just because it is semblance, and not because we take it to be something better.” This kind of licence is not gratuitous, but I would argue that it is fundamental to the survival of play — in both art and education. If we yield to logical semblance and assume that semblance is there to tell us something and teach us something which we’d have to subscribe to for all reasons but freedom, then we are back into the spiral of instrumental reason where knowledge is only formative because it yields a specific end.

In the age of a marketed educational system, where the curricular engineer is god, we need to cast back our eyes to what we have elected to be educators for. If there are two fundamental aspects to my being an educator I would never hasten to say that they are identifiable in the childhood that we all share and in the play by which we (in spite of the School) have always claimed a right for. As an art educator, I find this notion of play even more relevant, as I would concur with Schiller’s claim that one cannot aspire to a freedom within semblance if semblance were to be loaded with a baggage that stifles jocularity.

We owe our freedom to think to the gifts of play and childhood. Without such freedom we could never make a case for education ... let alone art.

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