

Piranesi, Movement, Fantasmal Invention

Clemens C. Finkelstein

¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275 d–e, ed. C. J. Rowe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

² Mitchell, W. J. T., 1986, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 39.

*Socrates: You know, Phaedrus, there is a strange thing about writing which makes it analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive: but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words: they seem to talk to you as though they have something in mind but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing for ever.*¹

Prologue

Movement, in Giovanni Battista Piranesi's drawings, appears as a well-constructed dramaturgy of the hidden, the obscured, the unknown, or the back and forth of a before and after, of a moment retained in pen and ink. The construction and deconstruction of architectural structures and lucid fantasies simultaneously emanate from the etched lines, striations, and vibrations, that – frozen in time – exist as potentialities of forces unraveling and expanding from the two-dimensionality of the papyraceous surface in undulating pressure. An assemblage of directionality combines with layers of movement – time and space – synthesizing as a static image, which defies its very definition as such. By approaching one of the architect's etchings and scenographic works

in a closer inspection of the performance of forces depicted, the following examines the inventive impetus of pitting reality against fiction, or vice versa, stretching the potential of time-based perception beyond the constraints of either dimensional manifestation. Setting out to go through two key movements that crystallize in Piranesi, this excerpt delves into the operations and visual syntax that reminds us that “we can never understand a picture unless we grasp the ways in which it shows what cannot be seen.”²

Movement, in the way this paper is shaped, becomes structurally analogous to the characteristics it embodies in musical composition. Here, kindred to its more fitting German translation as *Satz*, movement is constructed as a sentence: words, meanings, and ideas sequentially linked together to make sense. Various movements, each with their very unique content and quality – tempo, directionality, semantic and grammatical pattern – perform jointly to recite a total history and stretch the limits of fiction and reality as malleable mutation. Entering an analytical reading of one of Piranesi's “imaginary architectural compositions” of the late 1740s, the initial operation, here, will unravel as *abduction* – a movement that strays away from the center – homing in on the temporal aspect constructed in Piranesi's compositions. A subsequent turn to the

movement of *adduction* – directed toward the center – will fold back the core and essence of the architectural narrative into a creative dynamism that anchors Piranesi in an intermediary state between reality and fiction, at the potential-laden moment where a dissolution of substance becomes possible. Here, the generative bivalence of image and text, Piranesi's fruitful navigation of both to prepare the ground for his dramatic projection of architectural hypotheses, will join in the syntactic construction – from an outward directionality to an inward folding to an unceasing negotiation of the visible/invisible.

[Movement A: Abduction] – The wor(l)ds of artifact

*What is real is the continual change of form: form is only a snapshot view of a transition.*³

³ Henri Bergson. "The Cinematographical Mechanism of Thought and the Mechanistic Illusion – A Glance at the History of Systems – Real Becoming and False Evolutionism", Chapter 4 in *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell, Ph.D. New York: Henry Holt and Company (1911): 272–370 (301).

Floating in an oscillation between foreground and background, dark lines erect what might be thought of as a mausoleum or a palace that protrudes in cross-like extension from a core that poses as the entrance to the architectural structure, complete with two converging flights of stairs, forming a pyramidal shape with the convex balustrade at its base. Embellished by a group of three sculptures and a heavily ornamented surface structured by four hemicycles that push the mezzanine gallery upwards and outwards from the flatness of the medium in the direction of the viewer, the architectural structure in ebony-brunet ink sits on top of a chromatically less intense, ephemeral layer of red chalk. Sketch-like, in fast and deliberate strokes, the nether layer stacks space through superimpositions of movement in fluctuating fervor. A dramatic scene articulates in front of our eyes. Presence accumulates in the palpable substance of the monumental palace, which is lined by two rounded protrusions raised on tall Corinthian columns with heavily ornamented cupolas: frieze, vases, moldings, sculptural

figurines, and drop-like medallions that hang from the architrave, dangling in between pairs of fluted columns.

Two groups with anthropomorphic outlines allow for the dimension of the surrounding architecture to be fathomed in its magnificence, while at the same time paling in comparison to the numerous sculptures at the base of the mausoleum and spread throughout the surrounding landscape. Interesting in this quixotic composition is the elemental use of a classical ruin as archetypal foundation. A structure of three or four Doric columns, complete with entablature on which the crowning temple structure (and the concomitant sarcophagus) is planned to be erected, becomes evident through the faint chalk outlines of further columns and the accompanying cupola that sit perfectly on top the antique artifact. Growing upwards, gaining in depth, portrayed in point of view from an anterior positioned courtyard as stage, the central architecture sits like a pearl encased by a faint backdrop of flat painterly allusions to buildings that come across virtually abstract in their simplicity and immateriality. Enhancing the elevation of this monumental neoclassicist fantasy, the supporting structures in the background not only remain as such, yet act as a foundation for the construction of the ethereal palace.

Dark ink covering the fading red chalk outlines in an additive procedure lends the impression that the building-materials increase in mass according to the temporal characteristic of a development in lieu of architectural construction. This upward and forward movement, from the two-dimensional plane of the paper-medium to a three-dimensional appearance, is most prominent in the towering obelisk that dominates the center-right of the scene. Here, animated from the flatness of the bottom shaft that is losing its distinct outline in the midst of other similarly shallow forms reminiscent of sepulchral design, the obelisk is raised into objecthood with vertical strokes of amber ink, culminating in the chromatically emphasized rectangular prism that crowns the arcane monolith.

As *abduction*, this movement, traversing from the center outwards, dominates Piranesi's architectural composition and is mirrored throughout the image by diverse architectural and sculptural elements such as the spiral-like ascending staircase on the bottom left, which flows from the middle in a curve back to the central gallery. Indicative of clouds and an overarching sky, wavy and curvilinear traces of red chalk hover in and between the architectural fabric, additionally lending movement rooted in nature ("growth") to the composition, which is meant to gain a representative violence and power through these metaphorical elements. Dancing figurines on the right side of the scene furthermore underline the celebratory "birth" of this chimerically utopian *Luftschloss* (cloud-castle), celebrating the performativity of the human body and demonstrating the interplay between the individual and the architecture they dream up, construct, inhabit, and dwell in.

Taking full advantage of the width and height of the surface, Piranesi nearly fills the entire paper, the foundational material itself becoming an additional element and layer in the creation of perspectival difference and depth for the artist, a supplementary frame. Evoking the phantom smell of cheap plaster and *papier-mâché* lingering in the air, the theatrical backdrop that supports the scene unveils the fakeness of what is portrayed. One cannot help but tie this scenographic design to Piranesi's talent for dramatic structures, which he ingeniously constructs as architectural "truth" though the temporal characteristic of movement and the birth of grandeur rooted in classical architectural ruins instrumentalized as the centerpiece for his composition.

Piranesi arranges and disperses, combines and distorts his artifacts in these, as Manfredo Tafuri put it, "organisms that pretend to have a centrality but that never achieve one."⁴ Perspectival multitude and ambivalence, which, as the Italian historian of architecture further remarked, dates back as far as Piranesi's compositions for the *Prima parte di Architettura e Prospet-*

tive (1743), are utilized consciously to further emphasize movement and a narrative progression in his designs. Tafuri marked this scenographic tool set down to "not merely a set designer's whim, but rather a systematic criticism of the concept of 'center.'"⁵ However, by reducing Piranesi's approach to a criticism of center dismisses too easily the autonomous, ontogenetic essence imbued in his etchings, a scripted progression that becomes most experiential in his fantastically inventive etchings and drawings – something that sways between reality and fiction to exceed the limiting conditions of either.

In his world of artifacts, Piranesi's predilection for archeology, resultant of his decade-long excavations in and around Rome, becomes apparent. Piranesi, who earned an international reputation and an honorary fellowship at the Society of Antiquaries of London following his four volumes of *Le Antichità Romane* (1756-57), freely moves from historical implementation to an imaginary creation, most vividly mirrored in the theatrical composition described above. The creation of something new, something fantastic in Piranesi is deeply reliant on an assemblage of elements taken from architecture's classical origin. However, the translation and appropriation of architectural elements into novel forms of creation here goes contrary to what the former Jesuit priest-cum-art-and-architectural-historian Marc-Antoine Laugier in his canonical *Essai sur l'architecture* (1753) describes as "imitation" in the sense of a non-reflective engagement with the "perfection" of a classical Greek architecture rooted in nature.⁶ In his extremely eclectic approach to montage, Piranesi rather echoes a poetic engagement with origins. His dramatic movement comes in some way close to what Giambattista Vico, one of Italy's greatest Enlightenment thinkers, in his seminal work *The First New Science* (1725), similarly described as "intelligent substance":

When men want to create ideas of things of which they are ignorant, they are naturally led to conceive them through resemblances with things

4 Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987), 27.

5 Ibid.

6 See Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, trans. Wolfgang and Anni Herrmann (Hennessy & Ingalls, 2009), 115.

*that they know. And when there is a scarcity of known things, they judge the things of which they are ignorant in accordance with their own nature. Hence, since the nature that we know best consists in our own properties, men attribute to things that are insensate and inanimate, movement, sense and reason, which are the most luminous labours of poetry. But when even these properties are of no assistance, they conceive things as intelligent substances, which is our own human substance. This is the supreme, divine artifice of the poetic faculty, through which, in a God-like manner, from our own idea we give being to things that lack it.*⁷

⁷ Giambattista Vico / Leon Pompa, *Vico: The First New Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151.

⁸ Erika Naginski, "Preliminary Thoughts on Piranesi and Vico," in Donald Kunze, Charles Bertolini, Simone Brott, eds., *Architecture Post Mortem: The Diastolic Architecture of Decline, Dystopia, and Death* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 179-204 (197).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁰ Naginski (2013), 197.

¹¹ Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Prima Parte di Architetture, e Prospettive* (1743), translation cited in Dorothea Nyberg, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: Drawings and Etchings at Columbia University*, exhib. cat. (New York, 1972), 117; as cited in Naginski (2013), 179.

Vico, though referring rather to an origin of (Greek) poetry and the form of the fable than architecture per se, clearly resonates with the Piranesian approach to "giving being to things that lack it" through the attribution of "movement, sense and reason" in his representational work. Archeology and architecture – similar to image/text or reality/fiction – become different sides of the same coin here regarding the imaginative properties of Piranesi's architectural structures and their scripted limits; productive in that one turns subject of the other through time, which then in turn becomes subject of the first again.

The notion of "ruin" becomes crucial when unravelling this Piranesian complex, transcending a pure nostalgia over lost origins and an acknowledgement of finitude in regards to form. Both in Vico and Piranesi, confirms architectural historian Erika Naginski, "[th]ey take the things we remember to be fundamentally constructive and hinged in some essential way to making – making form, making sense of history (...) as double coded things, that is, as mechanisms for remembering as well as for imagining."⁸ Archeology and architecture are thus intricately linked in a porous structure made up of truth and myth in equal measures. Naginski brings this to the point most decisively:

*There is no definitive answer to such an open-ended question, but some preliminary responses can be formulated. The opposed epistemological tendencies: the purported objectivity of archeology is signposted just as prominently as the exaggerations of an invented architecture; faithful of observation and an evocation of what exists share page space with imagination and complete fabrication; truth and myth stand side by side, and even, one might propose, crucially depend on each other's formal mechanisms.*⁹

Extant as composite, being and becoming, the ruin as artifact plays a crucial role as actuator in Piranesi. "The ruin," as Naginski states, "and the transmutation of form it implies might emerge as dynamic element whose composite aspect performs for its viewer the very nature of things seems to be central to Piranesi's sense of what ruins do."¹⁰ The existence of ruins, their state of "being" after the fact of "completion," allows us to further tie this potential into Piranesi's fondness for the derelict classical edifice as "new" building block for his innovative conceptions. Ruins, both as concept and materialization, embody the Piranesian belief that in order to achieve architectural greatness, the architect has to eclipse pure imitation of form – in regard to cultural origins and opposed to firm held beliefs by contemporaries like Le Roy, Laugier, and Winckelmann – and literally build (future) ruins with ruins, perpetuating the amaranthine movement transforming fiction into reality into fiction.

[Movement B: Adduction] – Folding Image and Text

*I will not repeat to you what you are observing close at hand.*¹¹

Piranesi's projective architecture needs movement. As procedural instrument and action, it is fueled by the

12 Vico (2002), 184.

13 Tafuri (1987), 29-30.

bivalence of image and text, forming in his work through intricate montage, a movement of *adduction* that folds towards the center against the unraveling systematic of *abduction*. Analogous to rain drops that agglomerate and converge into a raving stream, movement – as strategy to project and mediate states of construction that exceed the replication of a present moment by embodying prior and posterior states – enables Piranesi to allude to certain imperceptible processes imbued in his compositions through a threefold Vichean poetic expression: “*movere* [‘to stir up’], *agitare* [‘to toss about’], *versare* [‘to turn over’].”¹² After all, the image, which in Piranesi certainly takes premier position in sheer extent, though greatly autonomous in conveying ideas and projecting theoretical discussions, has to be seen in didactic tandem with the architect’s written commentaries and treatises on architecture. It is in the potent back and forth between image and text – literally bound together and folded into each other for greatest impact – that the architect manages to mediate with effective force his point of view.

The text-image relationship in Piranesi exists in multi-dimensional arrangements and manifesting marriages of convenience. Text is thus occasionally used as addendum to the authority of form and style mediated in the image; it becomes a tool of justification, instructive in how and what to read or interpret in the etchings and drawings. Or, as the relationship is turned around, the image becomes supportive of the text, explaining how certain assertions have been arrived at, becoming a further rhetorical tool in criticizing the texts and treatises of rival architects and theoreticians that find themselves under passionate attack by Piranesi.

Text, for Piranesi, is yet another way to express his disdain over Greco-centric definitions of architecture’s cultural origins and to lend a voice to his own thoughts. Imagination as protractor for architectural exploration stands at the fore. Imagination, as Tafuri duly notes, assumes its “irreplaceable role (...) as an instrument of scientific progress, as a source of hypotheses not otherwise

formulable, [which] had been repeatedly recognized within the debates of the Enlightenment movement.”¹³ Suspended selves, imagination and action as combined movement [image/text – text/image], make an appearance as decoding of theoretical paradigms for an analysis of cultural origins. The bivalence of image and text in Piranesi only illuminates this position. Text and image, as their other’s respective *modification* – an image to be read and a text constructing (mental) images – stand firm in potent relational progression to each other.

The *adductive* folding toward the center, toward an amalgamation of text and image, is achieved by Piranesi through the structural makeup of either of his media, inciting an iterative switching between both as mode of operation. *Modification* here must be seen as a structural change that refers to the sequential spiraling towards a point. Similarly, reminiscent of poststructuralists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s abstract diagrammatical machine, Piranesi’s organisms are rhizomatic in that they continuously build connections with different points along their trajectory, tracing and mapping in their movement. That this polemic agitation is characterized by an unhindered traversing of fictional and real elements has become clear in the above analysis of Piranesi’s composition from the late 1740s. Instead of a veiled inclusion of fantastical parts or the conception of chimeric hybrids, the architect openly concocts a series of conjoined vistas that act as a narrative scaling: “real” human bodies exploring the winding protrusions of a virtual architectural leviathan that is poised to construct and deconstruct itself according to amendments to its source code – a daringly surreal scenario for architects today, where this twofold process of VR construction is becoming a reality.

Epilogue

The above twofold movements of *abduction* and *adduction* have provided a first attempt at unfurling the creases of the wicked architect’s “dark brain” and his

14 See Margaret Yourcenar, "The Dark Brain of Piranesi," in *The Dark Brain of Piranesi and Other Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar-Strauss-Giroux, 1984), 88-128.

15 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 1928), trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1985), 43.

vision for architectural structures that reflect its inner workings between fiction and reality.¹⁴ Far from complete, this journey comes to a preliminary conclusion here with the notion of movement that finally strikes in one of its intransitive etymological meanings: "to affect with emotion" or "to prompt or impel toward some action" – voluntarily or involuntarily.

Piranesi's metaphorical hybrids – architecture/archeology, text/image, or fiction/reality – occupy a curious position in between functioning as symbol or allegory, as something that Walter Benjamin in his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928) accurately observed as "the one [the symbol] as a sign for ideas, which is self-contained, concentrated, and which steadfastly remains itself, while recognizing the other [allegory] as a successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time."¹⁵ In this vein, the architect occasionally perforates the bivalence of image and text, fiction and reality as separate – yet relational – entities by means of a picturesque puzzle that moves its audience to actively dissect and construct his worlds of archi-facts. Contrary to the Platonic believe that written words only "go on telling you just the same thing forever," Piranesi's scripts depend on the agency of their readers and bear a near infinite capacity to stretch out the limits of fiction in architecture by enlisting the power of fantasmal invention present in all of us.

Clemens Finkelstein is a historian and theorist of art and architecture. He is a doctoral student in the History and Theory of Architecture at Princeton University, a graduate of the History and Philosophy of Design program at Harvard University, and has worked extensively as a writer, editor, consultant, researcher, and curator in Europe and North America. Areas of professional interest include the history and philosophy of architecture, its relation to art history and aesthetics, especially in the context of Modernism, its temporal transformations, geographical displacements, and philosophical engagements; with a particular focus on critical traditions and pedagogy.