

The Acrobatics of the Figure: Piranesi and Magnificence

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In the history of aesthetics, Giambattista Piranesi's case is an extraordinary one, and the fact that he inspired and influenced such a vast number of authors, artists and architects clearly signals that he was both a unique and elusive figure. Aside from the obvious reasons for his continuing relevance, such as the nature of his interests and the extreme, uncompromising way he handled such content, we need to acknowledge Piranesi's invention of what we would today call "speculative drawing"; that is, architectural drawing not as a study, a design or a preparation for a materialized object but as *a practice in itself*. Piranesi himself stated that this practice was explicitly not that of the architect, who spent—and often wasted—most of his days trying to find clients, adapt plans, gather political support, and negotiate more variations.¹ Dissociated from building, the drawing's realm suddenly expands enormously. Certainly, it still relates to architecture and the notion of a future project, but also to scenography, as we can see in the case of the *Carceri*; and to fantasies, as in the *Grotteschi*; to artist's perspectives, as in the *Vedute di Roma*; to illustration, as in the *Antichità Romane*; even to archaeological observation, as in *Della Magnificenza*; and, of course, to the merging of several of these disciplines, as we can see in the plans for the *Campo Marzio*. By keeping as close to the architectural drawing as possible, Piranesi could deploy a project's power to speculate on the future while at the same time speculating on the past as much as novelists and painters are allowed to do. Speculative drawing enabled him to introduce mood, thought, fantasy and fear into architecture in a way that mere architectural practice would never have allowed him to do.

Of course, the invention of such a medium can only be sustained if it makes full use of its new powers. So many architects have struggled with the question how to do this. We could think of the late-Victorian architect William Burges, whose romantic drawings for a new, wholly Gothicist Law Courts building in London enchanted the public but never had the slightest chance of being built.² Or we could think of John Soane, one of architecture's absolute greats, and Joseph Gandy's watercolor renderings of his projects: looking at them, we can never fully rid our minds of the idea that these warm, golden pictures are actually more beautiful than the projects themselves. And this is true for a very specific reason: not because Gandy's drawings were of higher quality or Burges' project was unpractical but because Soane, Burges and Piranesi aimed to revive and glorify a past. And though they project that past into a future, they do not mean it to arrive in the present just yet. All three, and especially Piranesi, made a very specific claim on the notion

¹ Piranesi writes in his dedication for the *Prima Parte*: "There is no hope that an Architect of our times can successfully execute anything similar [to the Roman buildings of the past], be it the fault of Architecture itself... [or] of those who should act as patrons of this most noble art... no other option is left to me, or to

² The 1866–7 competition to design the new Law Courts buildings in London stands out for its organizers having invited only Gothic Revivalists, such as G.E. Street (the final winner), Gilbert Scott (the architect of St. Pancras station), Alfred Waterhouse and William Burges, one of the most radical Gothicists of his day.

of glory, or, as he called it, magnificence. Piranesi understood that architecture by its nature has an intimate relationship with magnificence; he understood its formal, “ascending” and “cumulative” qualities; moreover, he understood that ascent to a sunlit state of glory cannot be disconnected from descent, from the groundless and endless that we so often associate with the sublime.

Now, mentioning the two aesthetic categories of the sublime and the magnificent opens up a millennia-long history of aesthetics too convoluted to properly disentangle in this context. However, a few pointers can be given that afford us at least a sense of their relationship. First, it is not true that the sublime is merely associated with the groundless and the endless; its original meaning lies with the notion of the “high” as we recognize it from Longinus’ *Peri Hypsous*,³ generally translated as *On the Sublime* but literally meaning “on the high” or “on the elevated,” which is close to the German term *Erhabene*. The reasons why the sublime is sometimes associated with the high and sometimes with the deep are complicated, but in general it is safe to say that when it is associated with the high, it is derived from Plato’s heavenly Forms, which are located, outside of time, in the transcendent world of the mind. And since Plato’s Beyond is fundamentally defined as an Above, we could argue that transcendence is of a singularly spatial nature. Wherever it is, it is *there*. In contrast, when the sublime is associated with the deep, it relates specifically to time: the genesis of things is now not instantiated by earthly shapes “participating” in heavenly Forms⁴; rather, they “emerge” from a unified past.

The deep sublime, therefore, coincides with the Romantic notion of *Bildung* and formation as opposed to mere form.⁵ Formation is generally considered a purely immanent category; in fact, a force more than a form. We should not view this opposition as one of extremes within a philosophical debate but simply acknowledge that the sublime contains both spatial and temporal aspects, which necessarily coexist. For instance, Kant’s appreciation of the infinite as essential to the sublime involves the endless in time as well as the infinite in space. Kant calls the sublime essentially formless and without measure⁶; this is why it tends to confiscate the mind, and why the aesthetic of the sublime was the favorite of abstractionists such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, who in 1948 wrote

³ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, transl. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge University Press, 1935).

⁴ According to Plato, all particular forms relate to ideal universal Forms through what he calls “participation” (*methexis*), which has connotations with gift exchange and sharing as well as metaphysical issues concerning the whole and the parts. The gift cycle would allow the Forms to be conceived as eternal yet not as static, the latter being the standard interpretation. The sun (Plato’s central metaphor) is not fixed but circulates in the sky, and Plato often refers to it as doing so.

⁵ The German notion of *Bildung* is related to that of the *Bildungstrieb*, the “formative drive.” The latter concept stems from the biological debate in the mid-eighteenth century between preformationists and epigeneticists. Epigenesis theorized an initially undifferentiated state of the embryo, which developed through stages of progressive differentiation. This coincides with Schelling’s notion of the *Ungrund*, which he had earlier spelled as *Urgrund*. In the beginning, all was One, in a state that was “unthinged” (*Unbedingt*) but not at rest, filled with a chaos of opposing forces. The notion of *Ungrund* quickly developed into that of the unconscious; the term was used long before Freud appropriated it. Therefore, to understand the depth of the “unground,” we should conceive it as a depth in time, a geological and archaeological depth. It is very close to the *Abgrund* that we encounter so often in Caspar-David Friedrich’s paintings.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, §24.

the influential article “The Sublime is Now.”⁷ Before we proceed any further, we should state clearly that the magnificent is not of the same order. Sublimity and magnificence are close, even akin, but there is a major difference: *magnificence is always a quality of form*—yet, I hasten to add, of a very special type of form.

In a similar vein, the earlier Kant of the 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Sublime and the Beautiful* positioned magnificence—or, in German, *das Prächtige*—close to the sublime, though it also contained aspects of the beautiful. For Kant, the sublime was an extreme category, followed on a spectrum by the *Schreckhaft-Erhabene* (the terrifying), then the *Edle* (the noble), then the *Prächtige* (mostly translated as the splendid but coinciding exactly with the magnificent), then the *Schöne*, and finally, in diametrical opposition to the sublime, the *Hübsch*, or the pretty.⁸ At this point, we should not be distracted by the question of how correct his organization of the aesthetic categories is; rather, we should take note of the fact that Kant sees the magnificent as a mitigated and measured version of the sublime, because it mixes aspects of the noble and the beautiful. One of his examples is St. Peter’s, which he describes as a combination of a “large and simple frame” with “beautiful mosaic and gold.”⁹ And indeed, magnificence combines two essential aspects of architecture: the abstract, geometric structure and the ornate, shining surface—an argument that brings us very close to an understanding of Piranesi. But let us first go back to the notion of magnificence, before we start discussing its programmatic function in his works.

The term “magnificence,” which etymologically combines *magnus* (“great”) and *facere* (“to make”) to signify “the doing of great deeds,” is consistent with the Aristotelian term *megaloprepeia* from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, defined as the “disposition to expend substantial private wealth on projects that both benefit the city and... bring credit on the individual.”¹⁰ In short, greatness lies in the relative size of the gift and the subsequent esteem it brings to its donor. The fact that magnificence is derived from gift-giving is crucial, since it implies that the term was originally reserved for acts and deeds before it was applied to objects.¹¹ In the history of aesthetics the conflation of activity and object is not uncommon, as in the case of beauty, a term that can be applied to a face, a phrase, a walk in the park, a way of walking, anything. And the same applies to ugliness, ridiculousness, vulgarity, cuteness, and all other categories. In fact, in aesthetics no fundamental distinction is made between things and actions or between objects and events. In this spectrum, magnificence takes its own place and emphasizes the verticality

⁷ Barnett Newman, “The Sublime is Now,” in: *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1948] 1990), 170. Cited, of course, by Jean-François Lyotard in “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.”

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, tr. J. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1764] 1991), 45–55, 87.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.1122a-b.

¹¹ Lars Spuybroek, “Charis and Radiance,” in: *Giving and Taking: Antidotes to a Culture of Greed*, eds. J. Brouwer and S. van Tuinen (Rotterdam: V2_Publishing, 2014), 119–50. This essay develops the idea that beauty as an aesthetic concept evolved from gift exchange, which in ancient Greek culture centered around the notion of *charis*, usually translated as “grace,” though it also means favor, gratitude, pleasure, and beauty. The gift cycle embodied by the Three Graces (giving, receiving and returning) exists in all cultures in one way or another.

that we encountered with the sublime, in contrast to categories such as the pretty and the vulgar, which emphasize the horizontal, shallow and flat. Therefore, alongside the great, we quickly recognize as synonymous with the magnificent the splendid, the glorious, the illustrious, the superb, the grandiose. That does not mean all powerful and elevated positions are wholly magnificent, but it is no accident that many kings' and emperors' names—including Alexander and Peter—have been suffixed with “the Great,” and that Lorenzo de Medici was called “Il Magnifico.” On the other hand, it goes without saying that, though kings and emperors get magnificence for free, this by no means signifies that they can claim it: one has to perform great deeds to earn such praise. Similarly, objects such as books, buildings, or symphonies, can qualify as magnificent, relatively independent of their size. A movie can be great, a poem magnificent. Greatness has nothing to do with bigness. What counts is that great things combine various aspects of radiance (glory, splendor, luster), wealth (affluence, abundance, gift) and power (nobility, excellence, structure), without any external structure to hold them in an elevated position. Things that are magnificent are so by themselves, and in that sense they are neither big nor small.

It is the pure reversibility of object and action that makes a thing scaleless, not a connection to anything larger, such as a network, *Umwelt* or *Welt*.¹² In the realm of the aesthetic, an act can present itself as an object, and an object as an activity. Things act (and eventually act on us), and acts are things. In aesthetics, we often refer to this idea using the notion of the motif or the figure, and each has an elaborate history. A figure can be a form but also a gesture or a set of gestures or movements. We describe the motifs on a frieze as “meandering” while realizing perfectly well that nothing is actually moving.¹³ This reversibility of path and trace, of channel and movement, lies at the heart of how things exist aesthetically. And in the case of magnificence, it means that we need a specific type of figure that allows a scaleless thing to qualify as great. What makes a thing, which is not big as an object, great? When we return to the work of Piranesi with this thought in mind, we quickly discover just such a special type of figure in his etchings and drawings: what I would call the *cumulative figure*. It is a heaping, cascading, stepping, aggrandizing figure with which he organizes his *candelabri*, his *grotteschi* and his *vedute*, from the smallest object to the largest, and from perspective to frontal views. We encounter cascading proliferations of arches, bridges and colonnades; stacks of wholly disparate objects;¹⁴ views leading to other views and again to still others, generally leading the eye upward. The cumulative figure is not as smooth as the *serpentinata* figures of Giambologna and

¹² Bruno Latour, who calls things “actants,” views entities as activities because they are part of networks, a concept he derived from Heidegger’s notion of a *Welt*: things “open up” towards a world. Heidegger again derived it from a contemporary biologist, Jakob von Uexküll, who viewed all living beings existing in their own *Umwelt*, what he called a *Seifenblase*, a soap bubble. All three have a functional concept of this world-network, where thing and world define each other reciprocally. Here I borrow the twin concept of the thing-act, but disconnect it from any hypothetical world as the determining factor of such action.

¹³ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1953), 64. Lars Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things* (Rotterdam: V2_NAI Publishing, 2011), 178-183.

¹⁴ Horace Walpole described Piranesi’s designs as piles: “He piles palaces on bridges, and temples on palaces, and scales Heaven with mountains of edifices” (from: *The Works of Horatio Walpole*, Vol. 3, London, 1798, p. 399).

Hogarth¹⁵ but rather stepped, rough and incremental; nonetheless, it is a figure, that is, a conflation of object and movement. It is a figure of richness and abundance that adds to what has already been added and then adds again, not so much by layering but precisely by accumulating and spilling over. For Piranesi, every thing is a cornucopia.

When we look at his vases in the *Vasi*, his chimneypieces in the *Diverse Maniere*, his man-sized candlesticks (especially those), the high altar in S. Maria del Priorato, the stairs that seem to go on forever in the *Carceri*, the terraces of the *Campo Marzio*, the decorations in the *Parere su l'Architettura*, the frontispieces of the *Antichità Romane*, we see the same thing again and again: figures exceeding themselves iteratively, leaping from themselves while remaining with themselves, generally engaged in the most prodigious antics and exhibiting the most elaborate acrobatics. *Everything aims for the highest point*, be it a facade, a view, a candlestick, a city, anything—but it does so without leaving itself. Striving is not a matter of ecstasy, which we typically associate with the sublime. Things definitely take a turn in Piranesi's universe, but as they do so, they define themselves—at least aesthetically. In his world, and maybe ours, things are like athletes or acrobats: while striving for the best, they show themselves. Or, to put it more paradoxically: in their acrobatics, things stand on their own, simply because the object has turned into a figure. When we look at the wondrous architecture of the *Campo Marzio*, we don't see fragments, or Tafuri's *bricolage*,¹⁶ or a "critique" of classical order, or any other type of deconstruction; no, we see figures standing on their own, organized entirely within themselves. We should not take this lightly: the order that creates things is not shared with other things, which are in turn created by their own order. Things are not nested according to some ontological set theory in which parts form wholes and wholes in turn are parts of bigger wholes, et cetera; no, there are only wholes.

It is like a universe of snowflakes: each flake is perfectly organized, but that organization is not shared spatially between them. Nevertheless, we haven't entered a world where all contact consists of chance encounters and blind dates; things do connect precisely and intimately, but on their own terms. In the realm of architecture, this would mean that urbanism's claims over the object would be declared null and void. There is in fact no space external to the figure, no outer, universal order holding these things together: they only come together to add more glory, more verticality. Again, let us not mistake such a world for one where things blindly elbow their way upward; there is great generosity (in Aristotle's sense) and no lack of communality (though there is definitely a lack of solidarity). And each flake constitutes a palace, or a mausoleum, a garden, a circus, or a bathhouse, all of them appearing in large numbers. The *Campo Marzio* is a world devoid of work and workspaces. Huizinga's notion of play offers us a powerful conceptual tool for comprehending its program, turning our notion of the plan of the *Campo Marzio* into a *ludic* plan—unsurprisingly, since it concerns the field of Mars. Things are added to

¹⁵ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 51 and 73. The *figura serpentinata* started as a late Renaissance concept of graciousness and smooth movement but was soon used by Mannerists such as Giambologna for more contorted postures (cf. *Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1566). Hogarth's use of the figure, which he termed the "line of beauty," is closer to its Mannerist application, though his definition seems to suggest the Renaissance variant.

¹⁶ Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), 15–6.

another in pure competition, in *agon*,¹⁷ but not in space—there is no mediation, no overall mediator. These are *figures without ground*.

And here we arrive at a crucial point. Piranesi was perfectly aware that a magnificent city is not just a city full of palaces and memorials: as the palatial objects competitively aggregate, the ground underneath opens up further and further, into what he so aptly designates the Hanging City, the *Città Pensile*. Of course, we recognize this concept of suspension from the *Carceri* and *Della Magnificenza*, where it often takes the form of underground structures such as massive sewers and foundations: the nonhuman spaces of technology. Needless to say, today every thriller and suspense movie uses ducts and sewers to house the monsters threatening the lives of the terrified humans. More importantly, in the light of our comparative analysis of the sublime and the magnificent, we should comprehend that this polarity of the vertical axis plays a role in both categories. In the sublime, the vertical axis extends between the high and the deep; in Piranesi's world, we cannot have the glory of the magnificent without the suspense of the groundless, of the porous, unstable earth.¹⁸ Pointing upward, toward the sun and its golden rays, we call one pole magnificent; pointing downward into the dark and unknown, we call the other tragic.

The tragic is not simply the opposite of the magnificent; it is the temporal, event side of that axis, while the magnificent stresses the spatial side of it, the side of objects.¹⁹ It is the space of the fall, and very well illustrated by the *Carceri*, which is conceptually the mirror image of the *Campo Marzio*. While the latter is essentially a plan, an *ichnographia*, the *Carceri* is without plan. Ulya Vogt-Göknil's excellent analysis from the 1950s clearly shows the impossibility of reconstructing a plan from the perspectives of the *Carceri* series.²⁰ The perspectives are ambiguous, consisting of views constructed from multiple plans that overlap and contradict one another. The infinitude of the proliferating²¹

¹⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1938] 1955). Huizinga stresses the need for isolated and enclosed spaces for play, which can be a tennis *court*, a football *field*, a chess *board*, a poker *table*, the *stage* of a theatre, or the *arena* of a circus. The suspension of universal rules is essential to any successful form of play, race or game. Later, Roger Caillois restructured Huizinga's ideas and distinguished four forms of play: *mimesis* (imitation), *agon* (competition), *ilinx* (vertigo) and *alea* (chance). See: Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, [1958] 2001).

¹⁸ Sarah Maclaren, *La magnificenza e il suo doppio* (Milano: Mimesis Edizioni, 2005). Maclaren follows a route to appreciating Piranesi similar to the one I take here. Using a somewhat idiosyncratic formulation, she positions Piranesi's works between two forms of magnificence, one "politically correct" and the other "black," the latter functioning as the *Doppelgänger* of what we generally view as magnificent. I'd say that the *magnificenza nera* is nowadays the more politically correct notion, and maybe we should start to reconsider the other more seriously—even so, Maclaren's book, partially based on the work of Mario Perniola, is a valuable one.

¹⁹ For further clarification, see: Lars Spuybroek, "The Ages of Beauty," in: *Vital Beauty: Reclaiming Aesthetics in the Tangle of Technology and Nature* (Rotterdam: V2_Publishing, 2012). In this essay, I analyze Charles Hartshorne's aesthetic diagram, in which he splits the sublime downward into the tragic and upward into the magnificent, with *the two aligning vertically*. I think Hartshorne's diagram, which is based on Whitehead's later ideas, offers the only proper framework for understanding relations between aesthetic categories, and it is surprising how much of Piranesi's work fits within the diagram's systematics.

²⁰ Ulya Vogt-Göknil, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi "Carceri"* (Zurich: Origo Verlag, 1958), 30–6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 46: "Obwohl diese Bauten stellenweise eine sehr solide Tektonik vortäuschen, ist ihr eigentliches Formengesetz die *Wucherung*... Aus Brücken sehen wir tatsächlich Türme wachsen, aus denen wieder neue

structures of the *Carceri* creates a universe where “the center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere,”²² of course, but most of all, the drawings of the *Carceri* depict a setting for an event, a tragic event—or, if you will, a tragic play. With the magnificent, it is always the object that has our focus; with the tragic, we ourselves are the focus. They are of the same order, but whereas the magnificent object is located in space, the tragic event happens in time. Therefore, while the architecture is fleeing from us, we come to a stop. While the architecture seeks the endless, we come to our end. The tragedy of the *Carceri* is that its infinity matches our finality. Things not only stand on their own but collapse in on themselves too. We should understand the groundlessness and the ever-ascending figures of the magnificent as comprising one vertical axis, or better, one *vertical horizon*.²³ The space of the tragic fall is the same space as that of the acrobatic jump. Each acrobatic figure in Piranesi’s universe stands on its own because it spins around its own vertical axis.

Coming to a conclusion of this brief exercise, I think we could say that Piranesi’s project is one of a radical pluralism; his world is completely granular.²⁴ Things meet, negotiate, bounce and break, certainly, but without such behavior being directed by external orders. All order is internal, and all radiance external. This might seem surprising if we look at it from the perspective of the Roman Empire, which never hesitated to force an iron grid over any foreign landscape whatsoever. But it does not if we take the archaeologist’s viewpoint. Piranesi’s archaeology has often been ridiculed as fantasy, but his quest was never one aimed at excavating or uncovering a hidden truth; on the contrary, it was a project of bringing things into the sunlight, and in the process, accepting that things remain on that vertical trajectory and consequently become disjointed. Indeed, instead of seeing the *Campo Marzio* as a city of palaces, we should call it a favela or a *slum of palaces*, where affluence and abundance lies in each distinct whole, not between them. The *Campo Marzio* shows that palaces, mausoleums, and circuses, in all their glory, cannot be added up without friction, nor without opening to the void below, but that their frictional addition adds up to more magnificence.

Brücken hervorgehen... Die Wucherung, zum architektonischen Gliederungsprinzip erhoben, läßt die einzelnen Bauelemente sowie ihre Funktion stets als miteinander vertauschbar erscheinen.”

²² Jorge-Luis Borges, “The Fearful Sphere of Pascal,” in: *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), 225.

²³ Lars Spuybroek, *The Architecture of Continuity* (Rotterdam: V2_Publishing, 2008), 37 and 97.

²⁴ Famous pluralists – to mention just two – include William James, who called his philosophy “mosaic” and wrote *A Pluralistic Universe*, and Paul Feyerabend, author of *Conquest of Abundance*, a title that interests us for obvious reasons.