

## THE ETERNAL MODERNITY OF RUINS:

### PIRANESI'S DARK IMAGINATION

*"I need to produce great ideas and I believe that were I given the planning of a new universe, I would be mad enough to undertake it"*



Giovanni Battista Piranesi was probably one of the greatest artists in the history of etching and the *Vedute* genre. But he was more than that. A visionary architect with colossal ambitions who hardly built any buildings, a tireless polemicist (erroneously) in favour of the supremacy of ancient Rome over that of Winkelmann's Greece, he indelibly influenced the twin streams of neo-classicism (as evidenced in Sir John Soane's Bank of England and Robert Adam's furniture) and the romanticism of Coleridge and De Quincey, the first to map out for us the dark cartography of an agoraphobic imagination, a hallucinatory *cinéaste* whose visions were projected in

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, the passionate genius of ruins, and the first to transform culture into nature and back again.



He was the exact contemporary of Rousseau, Diderot and Casanova, and older by a generation of Goya of the *Capricci*, of Goethe of the *Roman Elegies*, and of the Marquis de Sade, the obsessive. With Rousseau he shared the redemptive grace of tireless work, with Casanova the possessive, devouring,

consuming eye, with Goya the dark recesses of human suffering, and with de Sade the obsessive redemptiveness of writing *as* etching.



**P**iranesi was not the first to invent or appreciate ruins, nor the love of Rome. While Claude Gelee and Poussin had seen in Rome a discourse for a general order, Piranesi created the ruin as a subject not just for aesthetic contemplation, but for a discourse on decay, decline, and the

transformation of forms of life. He was an archaeologist before his time, meticulously recording every detail including details that had become erased through erosion and defacement. He was thus the first chronicler of the traces of time, of monuments not as monuments from the past, but as monuments *to* change. He rendered the past mysterious, meditating on the continuity of forms, of how things survive and change. His double vision transforms culture into nature and back again. The temple becomes nature, but in nature it becomes the sacred grove. He is the tragic poet of architecture.



**T**he miniscule humans in his etchings are not gentlemen, but Goldonian characters, more Venetian than Roman. He never harmonised the nobility and the gravity of humans with the dignity of buildings. The presence of these underworld figures introduces into the deserted scenes an element of menacing danger, human insects who crawl through

the ruins.



In 1764 he undertook the renovation of the Priory of the Knights of St John on the Aventino, following the request of Cardinal Rezzonico (d. 1783), a Grand Prior of the Knights. This was a tour de force in the use of architecture as theatre of theatre, a Pirandello of architecture. H.J.A. Shire has described it as a work of “superb crisp elegance and inventive symbolism”. The enclosed garden, like a theatre set for an 18<sup>th</sup> century opera, has a secret. Peer through the key-hole of the closed Priorato door and all Rome lies before you. The actor in the theatre set he created becomes the viewer, a hidden voyeur of perspective, in an early version of *The Draughtman’s Contract*.



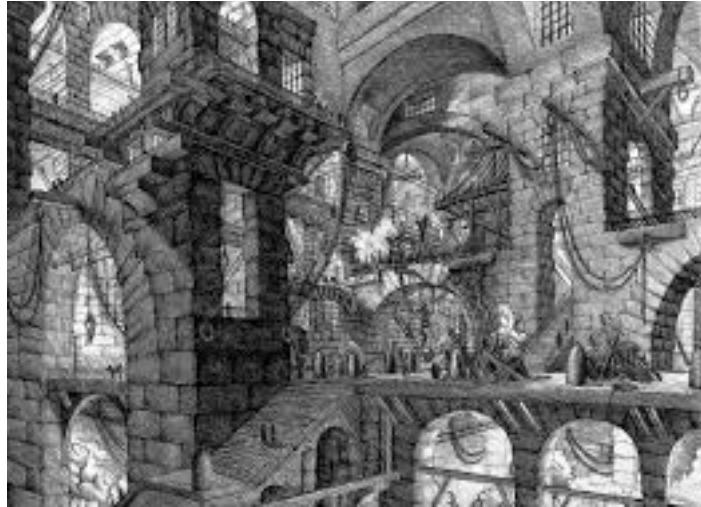
The stark economy of the febrile and mysterious mind of Piranesi begins and ends in the punitive hell of his (now highly rare and valuable) *Carceri d’Invenzione*, an almost abstract play of structural forms rendered in terms of pure masonry. Here the pulley ropes, cables, grilles, joists and bars, these sinisterly indistinct instruments of the torture of the imagination and the imagination of torture, serve to produce a web of visual snares as menacing and as brittle as a spider’s web. As Wilton Ely writes:



‘In the *Carceri* we have reached a situation where each plate no longer simply represents but *is* an architectural experience in itself. Through the most complex system of decoding where

conventional perspective sets up expectations only to deny them by introducing fresh patterns, the spectator becomes inescapably involved in the creative process. Each plate embodies a set of endless possibilities. As never before, the Western system of pictorial space is questioned with all its implications concerning the nature of perception. The challenge was not to be met again until the revolution of cubism'.

Piranesi can also be approached as an Installation artist before installations became *de rigueur* among contemporary artists. By insinuating a subversive vision through the text as image, and the image as text, and interspersing this mental representation between the eighteenth century viewer and the 'blind-spots' that classical ruins represented during this period, he helped



achieve a veritable transformation in the way his contemporaries perceived their material and imaginary environment. In this respect his work is of particular interest to the contemporary viewer, artists, art critics and theorists, as well as those enamoured of classical art.

PAUL SANT CASSIA  
READER IN ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM