Firenze Architettura (1, 2019), pp. 4-15
ISSN 1826-0772 (print) | ISSN 2035-4444 (online)

DOI 10.13128/FiA-10642 - www.fupress.com/fa/

The Master of Desiring

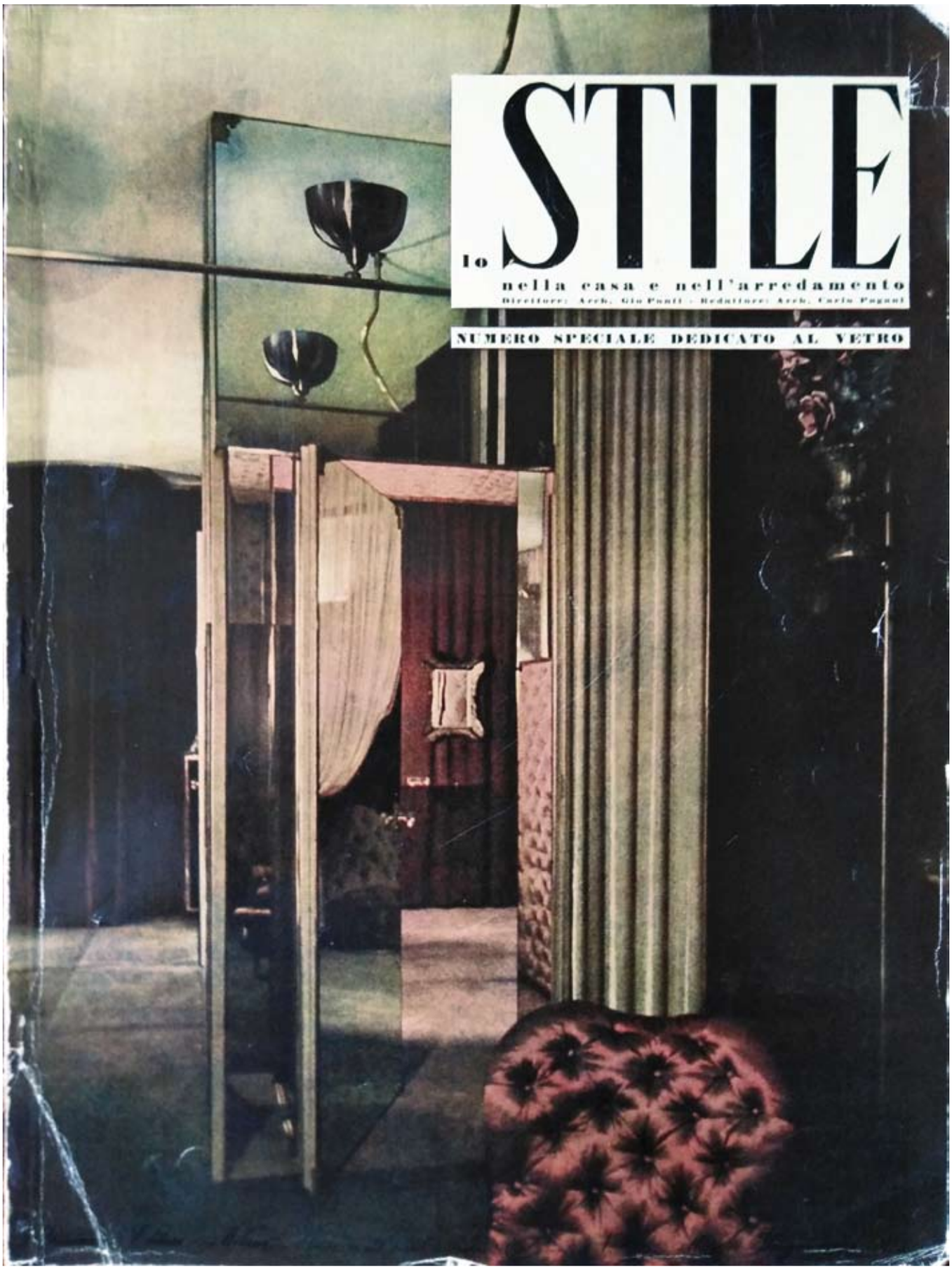
Kurt Walter Forster

mixing memory and desire … (T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*)

Desire, as we all know, feeds on itself. Not only the object or person that are being desired, merely an image, even just a phantom, of them can rekindle desire and set it aflame. Consumed by desire, all wanting and yet deprived of it, the feeling can spread to every limb. Not only do we desire because desiring lends intensity to our sense of self, it also affects others and, as if by magic, ignites their desire in turn. If desiring is to experience the *lack* of something that is being wanted, will possessing that something bring satisfaction or merely strain our feelings?

While not the only sense by which we sustain our desire – surely, smell and sound hold their own – the *eye* is perhaps the most privileged organ by which we fasten on the object of our desire and indulge the feeling we hold for it. To stare, as if to fixate a prey, or only furtively glancing at it, can turn beholding into a feast (for the eye) or into torture (for the heart). Unable to take ones eyes off something makes the lack of it all the more painful, the memory more maudlin, the loss unbearable. If such desiring inhabited our surroundings, transforming them into a chamber of longing, what would they look like? I suggest that they would come straight out of Carlo Mollino's imagination, and not only from his mind but his apartments, too. Where languid sculptures, half-blind mirrors, spidery tables and deeply cushioned seats induce a curious sense of strained relaxation, of unfulfilled yet savored appetite, *there* is the haunted house of desire. Because it is the body that desires, not just the eye and the heart, it matters where and how we find ourselves when caught in a state of desiring. Engineering will be no less important than imagination and theatrical flair in order to induce a state that triggers anticipation. The mild dread when the lights go out and the thrill when the curtain rises, flooding the audience with the «air of another planet»[1], are only some of the commonplace experiences that make theaters the ideal venue for desiring. The experience of sudden transport – Karl Friedrich Schinkel's definition of the theater's unique accomplishment, namely to move the audience to another time and place without requiring them to raise more than an eye – is also the definition of wish-fulfillment[2]. In yet another respect is the theater the true arena of desire: we transfer not only our attention according to the power of the stage, we also shift from the actor's role to the actor as a person and back again, as do the actors themselves. Hence it is possible to say that we desire an actor in a particular role rather than only seeing her or him on stage in whatever guise. Ideally the actor must be a person we might desire, and his or her role one we affectively like or dislike. What actors accomplish turns out to be rather close to the heart of desire itself: we wish for it and cannot have it; we have her and cannot keep her what she is, or was, or might be.

Carlo Mollino (1905-1973) built such a theater for himself, more than once and in different domains. Preparing his domestic 'stage' in an apartment where he did not really reside but rather acted, on the snow-covered slopes of his native Piedmont and in the rice paddies of its plains, but always with an eye to their possible role as stage, as the arena of desire. To begin with, something that was to occupy him for many years, schussing down the snowy slopes, he made a charade of a popular 'sport'



Copertina del numero speciale dedicato al vetro della rivista «lo STILE nella casa e nell'arredamento» diretta da Giò Ponti, Garzanti, Milano, Maggio-Giugno 1941

that celebrates speed and danger. Most of the photographs he took as a theorist of *discesismo* – of downhill skiing – he took in his garage. Striking the perfect pose while staying immobile, he could then blend the shot into winter landscapes he seemed to traverse at great speed.

Throughout his life Mollino also busied himself with the theatrical stage. Before the Second World War, he toyed with theatrical sets, and as early as 1950 began to design auditoria[3]. If set designs and the reshaping of theatres seem to have been improvisational pursuits at first, in hindsight they could not have developed a more durable hold on Mollino's imagination. Theater and cinema lure their public onto treacherous ground. By this time, the moral opprobrium against theatrical sham may have waned, but the technologies of spectacle and the psychology of performance were destined to transform the very nature of modern media experience. More than ever, it was difficult to keep the world of the stage and screen apart from reality, as illusions of every kind slipped from the phantasmagoric into the political and back, turning the century's life itself into a deceptive, even desperate spectacle.

Though Mollino was licensed as an architect and worked in his father's engineering firm for more than 15 years, the nature of his architectural works cannot simply be classified as building or even as design, but rather as the creation of *settings*. Settings for specific activities, such as horseback riding and alpine skiing, or for places that induce particular states of being, such as private retreats, auditoria, exhibition spaces, and even the intimate world of dreams. What remains constant across the wide range of buildings he designed, and what anchored them in his imagination, is also the single characteristic they share: theatrical destination[4]. All of them set the stage and play to the curiosity of visitors and observers; all of them imply spectators and yield an infinite number of images. Just as a stage set is not constructed to function as the equivalent of the reality it represents, but rather to recast that reality as a memorable image, so Mollino's buildings produce unique impressions even while performing their mundane tasks. «I forget every thought and remember only images», declared Mollino's alter ego Oberon in the journal *Casabella* (1934), and this may be one of the reasons, he surmised, that as an architect he only recalled «sensations of his surroundings and his own feelings […] as long as they are connected to bodies and he is able to transform them into irrational and inexplicable figures»[5].

Steeped in cinema and wielding the camera himself, the young Mollino formed his kaleidoscopic vision of existence as artifice. At once the *metteur-en-scène* of his fantasies and an actor in them, he never forgot that he was also the spectator. As if in a maze of mirrors, he is everywhere to be seen and yet nowhere to be found: Behind the curtain or brazenly on the proscenium, he sets the lights, prepares the camera, but often arrests the action. Some of his celebrated photographs, such as those of his Casa Miller (1938) and Casa Devalle (1939–40), play elaborate tricks with views and reflections, matching materials that are soft and silken with others that are hard and shiny. One of his photographs, a color picture of the Casa Devalle first published on the cover of the journal *Stile* in 1942, admixes purplish tints to the mirror surfaces, but instead of including the reflection of Mollino's camera and of himself, extinguishes them and confines the interior to optical solitude. Remaining an *invisible* spectator, rather than one captured in his own picture, Mollino escapes via the *pentimento*.

Mollino who rarely strained his abilities as an engineer, treading lightly on the turf that made his father famous, pursued instead a curious and convoluted path of "corporeal" or "incarnate" thinking. Whether a hat rack was to be held in place by a coiling rod, or the best path of a schussing skier inscribed on a slope, Mollino always felt their trajectories in his body before computing and drawing them. His thinking did not pass through verbal or mathematical abstraction. Instead he tapped his intuition and drew on experience as a source of ideas. His body was his pencil, pondering and straining the forces playing upon it and allowing swerving lines to body forth, which is why his works possess a powerful sensual appeal and induce vicarious experiences in the observer. Perhaps the skier's swaying motion, sustained by speed and propelled by countervailing forces, most completely fulfills Mollino's ideal of giving shape to things. His treatise on *Discesismo* [Downhill Skiing] could be misclassified as a design book, a reflection on fluid aesthetics, a sports manual, or an ethical tract on the nature of locomotion. When he acknowledged that «almost all of my things come about in a way I never know» [«quasi tutte le cose mie nascono non so mai come…»], he was not only being coy, though he certainly was, but he was also honest, in the sense of admitting to irrational impulses and inexplicable penchants in himself[6].

Through all these expenditures of energy and emotion, Mollino cultivated a pose calculated to exceed the camera's capacity to absorb every one of its attributes. There are virtually no candid snapshots of Mollino, but a bewildering range of photographs that cast him in a variety of roles, all played by an unchanging *persona*. This is not to say that he was solipsistic, because he needed to lure others into the lair of his imagination in order to stir his own mind to work and flex the muscles of his body. On the ski slopes, it was Leo Gasperl; on the racetrack, Mario Damonte; in the air, his Swiss flight trainer, Albert Rüesch, who performed ideally what Mollino attempted for himself without taking up the gauntlet of the professional[7]. For the camera, he performed with dedication; for the calculated thrill of erotic excitement, he initiated lady friends into his wiles, and recruited others for more arduous assignments that required dressing the part as much as they relied on undressing as an art. His erotic photographs have been turned into semi-clandestine objects of private collectors and vanity publications, but they would be worth analyzing as a domain of his imagination that is intimately bound up with his design work rather than as the self-indulgences of a fetishist.

There is no doubt that Mollino's designs for furniture and his exquisite furnishings for private residences owe their qualities to the same sensibility that he schooled by studying Surrealist imagery and the photography of Man Ray in particular. What Ray and Mollino have in common is precisely their capacity to endow objects with the animate state of bodies and conversely, to objectify human limbs as fragmented representations of emotional states. This was as far as Mollino ventured into the making of objects and images that owe their *raison d'être* to art. In the domain of art proper, his friendships with the painter Italo Cremona and the writer Carlo Levi were defining for his perception of the city and his manner as an *arrangeur* of objects for his camera. He designed as much for the camera as for various private or ostensibly practical purposes. His is camera-ready work, for nothing that shapes the image escapes his forethought: Lighting is all-important, the qualities of every surface and their reflections congeal in the instant the shutter opens. These images retain a direct connection with their setting through a succession of internal frames that typically break the format into sharply divided segments. Such framed views assume spectators who, by implication, turn into observers

Museo Casa Mollino, Torino
photo courtesy © Valentina Ortaggi

Museo Casa Mollino, Torino
photo courtesy © Valentina Ortaggi

whose attention is as divided as the composite assembly of the parts captured in his images[8].

In 1943, Mollino carefully composed a drawing that refracts the draftsman's visage by reflecting just one half of his face in an unframed mirror, held in place above his knees by a telescopic arm, while the view behind him extends to rice paddies beyond the curtained pavilion that he pitched, tent-like, between their watery surface and a blazing sky[9]. As a matter of fact, the setting shares its sharply segmented fields of vision with the office of an eye doctor, its reversal of inside and outside and its disjunctive perspective with stage design. This pure line drawing assembles its multiple views, ranging from too near to too far, into a montage much as the physicist Ernst Mach attempted when he turned the eyelid into the ultimate "frame" of what we see. Apart from the centrally suspended mirror, everything seems to drift toward a liminal position, teetering toward the edges of our field of vision. The similarity with Mach's image from the inside of the eye's cavity reaches beyond the boundaries of human vision and suggests another eye, one seen as if it were carved at a monumental scale and staring straight at the viewer: Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's (1736–1806) famous image of the theater as the hollow of the eyeball and the illuminated stage as the world beyond its eyelid.

For Mollino, the theater furnished an abiding metaphor for his desire to cast things into the light of deeply personal interest and to build a stage, however small and exclusive, for an audience of one, himself. The objects in his tableaux never shed a mysterious loneliness, and invite us to share precisely the aspect that symmetrically corresponds to the loneliness of their creator. He recognized a kindred soul in the architect of Turin's most curious monument, the Mole Antonelliana. Mollino photographed it from the studio of his painter friend Italo Cremona as a spectral giant haunting the city in a dream scripted by Alessandro Antonelli (1798–1888), a dream that had already cast its spell over Nietzsche's last months in Turin when he besieged Jacob Burckhardt with the news that it marked the advent of Zarathustra's architecture[10]. In his essay of 1941, Mollino, admiring Antonelli's lonely quest for height, nevertheless conceived of the monument as made of «magic and power in (shades of) gray». Instead of an overbearing presence, Mollino saw in the Mole «a melancholy sense of immanence and abject silence conjoined in a fatal atmosphere of deliberate, yet resounding solitude»[11]. Within the theater of the city, the immensely tall Mole-its record height eclipsed only by the Eiffel Tower in 1889 – induced an anxious trance that tethers the "Zeppelin" of a building to its Surrealist antecedents from Dürer to De Chirico. In a word, Mollino completely refashioned the Mole as an image whose power is utterly theatrical and thereby as illusory as it is expressive.

The theatrical quality of Mollino's own drawings finds its counterpart in photographs that likewise conserve or elide traces of the photographer's presence. Sometimes it's only the lighting and staging of objects, sometimes the spectral presence of the lens that conjure a sense of inhibited action. Mollino was ever intent on recasting his interiors as much for the images they would yield as for the uses their occupants might have made of them. Strikingly similar interiors had also been invented by the young Raymond McGrath (1903-77) for a client of a very special sensibility, the English don Mansfield Forbes in Cambridge, England. Inaugurated in 1929 as a radically modern setting for gatherings of like-minded friends in their quest for modernity, the dream house Finella conjured effects of glass, mirrors, and metallic and lacquered surfaces inside the shell of an existing house[12]. This curious creation, laced with intimations of personal history, literary predilections, and sexual desires, caused a stir, launching the architect into the domain of interior design for the BBC at Broadcasting House. Finella was widely published and almost immediately picked up by Gio Ponti, who featured its «*ambienti d'eccezione*» in *Domus* as early as 1930[13]. Comparing period photographs of Finella side by side with Mollino's Casa Devalle of a decade later induces a momentary puzzlement as to the precise location of such hyper-interiors in the cultural geography of their time. Common to both is a particular sensibility in the absence of any author or recipient for the sensations they so strongly provoke. In other words, these interiors convey someone's manifest feelings of being host, partner, or lone occupant-and both McGrath and Mollino provided amply for all of these conditions-no less than they appeal to be remembered and conserved, if sometimes only in photographs. Mollino took on the job of photography with complete devotion, McGrath had to «pursue far and wide the elusive persons of Messrs Dell and Wainwright photographers» in order to fix the many fugitive and even hidden aspects of Finella[14].

Because images played such a fundamental role in Mollino's life, they could not leave his architecture unaffected. Several of his private buildings were known exclusively in self-reflexive icons, others have survived only in effigy. A peculiarly stagy quality unites even the most diverse among them and assimilates them by virtue of optical effects. Light and shade are the twin phenomena that play an unending game with each other, interrupted only by flashes of illumination bouncing off of mirrors, or darkness descending and engulfing them. Shadows acquire substance and leave more than fleeting traces. As if to give proof of a mysterious process of oxidation, light darkens the silver coating of mirrors and adds a shade to their lining. Some of the mirrors in Mollino's private apartment on Via Napione 2 bear patches of mysterious *sfumato* that suggest a darkness deep behind the glass[15]. Such chemical mutations in the silver lining recall Jean Cocteau's use of quicksilver to open the hard surface of the looking glass as the portal to another world[16]. In Mollino's apartment, the gradual darkening of the silver renders permanent the periodic impression of light, but the corridor to the past (and a future beyond existence) is lined by his «own photographs and other souvenirs of his life» along what he imagined to be an «avenue of eclipse»[17].

Similarly, but with his own pen rather than the chemistry of silver compounds, Mollino transposed light, reflection, and darkness in a vignette of entirely Surreal cast, moreover illustrating a literary experiment of his own: Based on a souvenir photograph taken in the room he occupied when sojourning with friends in 1934, he designed an illustration for his (incomplete) serial novel *L'Amante del Duca*[18]. By imitating the rigid lines of wood engravings so dear to Max Ernst in the 1920s, Mollino "ages" the already preterite photograph of a country house interior and hardens it into a chip of time. This is the real Mollino, forever staging scenes in which his feelings make all the difference: He reverses the contrast between the sunlit window and its blinding reflection by turning the room into a nighttime chamber with curtains brushing against the mirror glass. A brief spell in the countryside assumes the guise of memory as if Odilon Redon had put his pencil to it. By plunging the viewer into night and keeping the antiquated interior in a state of inexplicable suspense, Mollino conjured the suspicions and anxieties of the sleepless. Soon he began to arrange his objects – a fossil, a small sculpture, a piece of fabric – on hard surfaces that "expose" them and redouble them in reflec-

tion, creating a large number of still lifes in dialogue with the photography of Surrealist inspiration.

Mollino's experiences with private *mise-en-scène* and imaginary settings converged in a series of theatrical venues he designed after 1950. First, with the auditorium of the state radio company RAI in Turin, he turned what remained of an indoor circus into the twin lobes of stage and arena, chiefly for musical performances. In 1952, the Cinema-Teatro Balbo experimented with an even deeper interpenetration of audience and stage, recalling Gropius's Total-Theater projected for Piscator in Berlin, and in 1964–65, Mollino pulled out all the stops for a new Theater in Cagliari, where a deep cavea would have accommodated balconies on an elevated second shell. Of these, only the RAI Auditorium was built, but the frustrating failure of the other projects had not quelled Mollino's preoccupation with everything theatrical when he was suddenly called to elaborate plans for the Teatro Regio of Turin in 1965. Late, but not too late, a project came his way in which he could invest every quantum of his lifelong avocation. The Teatro Regio opened only after his death, but it bears his imprint in every detail.

The original court theater in Turin was among Europe's most celebrated, both for its architecture and its Baroque stage productions. After a fire and heavy-handed renovations, the theater languished through the Second World War and its aftermath until an ambitious lord mayor recognized the integrative power of municipal monuments and steered the commission Mollino's way. The fits and starts of its history challenged Mollino to project a building that would encompass and exceed its own history. And that is precisely what he did: On the celebrated square, he rebuilt the colonnaded front, and in the gap between its backside and the depth of the lot, he opened a vehicular passage under a tall canopy that doubled as an external foyer. From the cross-passage, theatergoers catch a first glimpse of the interior in its three-story height and soon find themselves circulating on platforms of swerving contours. Stairs soar like magnificent trees and their structural supports branch in anticipation of the fan-shaped ceiling. Folded like napkins of old into coffers of varying polygonal shape, the crisp ridges of this waffled concrete ceiling expand to form an extraordinary canopy. A good deal of the theater's effect derives from the contrast between its unpromising presence on the square – although the square greets visitors from one of the theater lobbies as if one was running back into a friend just after taking leave a moment before – and the breathtaking nature of the circulation area. Passing through one of the narrow stone gates with their oval mirrors reflecting theatergoers into infinity, an ascent begins that holds its own in comparison with such foyers as Hans Scharoun's at the Berlin Philharmonie, inaugurated shortly before construction began in Turin. Maybe one could think of the Teatro Regio as the largest stage on which Mollino indulged his private desire for an architecture that would hold its secrets to the last while teasing us along and keeping us prisoners of our own desires.

[1] «*Ich fühle Luft von anderem Planeten*», the first line of Stefan George's poem *Entrückung*, in S. George, *Der siebente Kreis*, in: *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 6/7, Bondi, Berlin 1931, p. 121; Arnold Schönberg set lines from Entrückung for soprano in his revolutionary *Second String Quartett* of 1908.

[2] See K.W. Forster, *Only Things that Stir the Imagination: Schinkel as a Scenographer*, in *Karl Friedrich Schinkel. The Drama of Architecture,* The Art Institute: Wasmuth, Chicago 1994, pp. 18-35.

[3] Collaborating with his painter friends Carlo Levi and Italo Cremona, Mollino provided designs for three theatrical productions: *Pietro Micca*, *Femmes d'escale* (1945), and *Au lever du soleil*. Only sketches, among them for *Femmes d'escale*, survive. Carlo Mollino, François Burkhardt, Roberto Gabetti, Giovanni Brino, Piero Racanicchi, and Fulvio Irace, *L'étrange univers de Carlo Mollino*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris 1989, p. 28.

[4] The dubious reputation of the theater extends into the use of the term "theatricality" in contemporary criticism, but the aversion to things theatrical is yielding to a new sense of the performative and the contextual, crosshatching the idealist categories of artistic genres and aesthetic integrity; see *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York 2003).

[5] The entire passage reads: «Ogni pensiero dimentico e solo ricordo le immagini: tutta la mia memoria è così: Sensazioni d'ambiente; situazioni dell'animo li ricordo solo se riferiti al mondo dei corpi e li posso tradurre anche in figure irrazzionali e inspiegabili poiché nulla hanno a che vedere col simbolo. Forse è anche per questo che debbo fare l'architetto, il quale appunto deve trovare forme e non simboli che siano intelligibili ai più e non solo a noi stessi. Musica degli spazi che parla e, non so perché, a volte descrive (musica onomatopoetica), senza altro esprimere che se stessa, ossia la bellezza che e in me», quoted after S. Jacomuzzi, *Invenzione e scrittura. Carlo Mollino romanziere*, *Carlo Mollino, 1905–1973*, exh. cat., Electa, Milan 1989, p. 64.

[6] C. Mollino, *Disegno di una casa sull'altura*, «Stile» 40 (April 1944): «quasi tutte le cose mie nascono non so mai come: sovente […] nascono proprio dal sogno del sogno; poi mi dò attorno con massimo scrupolo e intransigenza per farle coincidere con una possibilità empirica, costruibile, adoperabile, visibile».

[7] See N. Ferrari, *Mollino. Casa del Sole*, Museo Casa Mollino, Turin 2007, where his relationship on and off the slopes with the skiing ace and then world-record holder Leo Gasperl is documented.

[8] Framing as a means of heightening expression and illusion has been recognized as the key to Giambattista Tiepolo's paintings by Keith Christiansen; see *Tiepolo, Theater, and the Notion of Theatricality*, «The Art Bulletin» LXXXI, no. 4 (1999): 665-692. Christiansen summed it up as follows: «Tiepolo's art is one of illusion, and at the core of his soaring, all-embracing genius lies the illusion of mere theatricality», p. 689.

[9] *Carlo Mollino 1905–1973*, cit., p. 176. This pure line drawing is in the Archivio Carlo Mollino. It was made as a somewhat perverse exercise for the journal *Domus* in 1943, responding to the challenge of creating a prototypical bedroom. Mollino planned, in his own words, a «camera-cabina […] in una grossa cascina in zona di risaia: zanzare grosse come passeri, calma, cicale d'estate e rane: nebbia spessa come 'purea' d'inverno». A travesty of Baudelaire's «Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté, Luxe, calme et volupté», Mollino's pleasure room is plagued by insects and frogs, but artfully contrived as a capsule of extreme visual perplexities.

[10] *Nietzsche and 'An Architecture of Our Minds*,' ed. A. Kostka and I. Wohlfarth, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles 1999; see especially T. Buddensieg, *Architecture as Empty Form: Nietzsche and the Art of Building*, pp. 259-283.

[11] C. Mollino, *Incanto e volontà di Antonelli*, «Torino, Rassegna mensile municipale», 5 (May 1941): 3-15. The cited passage reads: «Magicità e potenza in grigio: malinconico senso di immanenza e di silenzio decrepito in una atmosfera di fatale e conscia solitudine, eppure sonora», p. 14.

[12] A comprehensive study of Finella, its client, and its architect, has been published by E. Darling, *Finella. Mansfield Forbes. Raymond McGrath, and Modernist Architecture in Britain*, in «The Journal of British Studies» 50, no. 1 (January 2011): 125-155. I'm grateful to Elizabeth Darling for bringing her work to my attention after I previously touched on McGrath in *An American in Rome: George Nelson Talks with European Architects*, introduction to *Building A New Europe. Portraits of Modern Architects. Essays by George Nelson 1935–1936*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2007, pp. 1-27. One is tempted to note a number of astonishing correspondences between the minds of Raymond McGrath (1903–77) and Carlo Mollino (1905–73) with regard to their mutual appreciation of glass in contemporary architecture and their love for *lepidoptera*, of which Mollino mounted numerous examples in a variety of frames in his apartment at Via Napione 2, while McGrath made exquisite watercolors [see, e.g., Lot 78 in the *Arts for Christmas Sale at Whyte's Dublin, 15 December 2007*, lot 78]. From 1946, McGrath unsuccessfully championed the design of a National Concert Hall for Ireland at Raheny.

[13] «Domus» 2 (November 1930): 50-52; for a discussion of the diffusion of McGrath's work, see Darling, *Finella*, cit., pp. 148-150.

[14] The letter of McGrath is quoted in Darling, *Finella*, cit., p. 149. It was with the commission to photograph Finella that Dell and Wainwright made their entry into architectural photography of English modernist buildings.

[15] Of his private quarters on the upper floor of a house situated on a triangular lot between the Po embankment and Via Napione, Mollino wrote in a letter to Elba of 18 April 1973, in the year of his death: «In questa […] tarda mia maturità sto preparando come il cinese di rango fa ornare in vita il suo mausoleo, in un corridoio della mia casa, una specie di viale del tramonto laddove in sequenza stanno le fotografie e quant'altri ricordi della mia vita», *Carlo Mollino 1905–1973*, cit., p. 274.

[16] Death, famously embodied by the actress Maria Casares, passes through mirrors in Cocteau's film *L'Orphée* of 1950.

[17] C. Mollino, *Disegno di una casa sull'altura*, cit., (author's translation).

[18] Both are conveniently reproduced side-by-side in *Carlo Mollino 1905–1973*, cit., p. 71.

Carlo Mollino
Teatro Regio, Torino
photo © Armin Linke, 2010

Carlo Mollino
Teatro Regio, Torino
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