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Views of the Water City

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Notes

This essay is an exploration of visual representations and interpretations of Venice and its lagoon from the sixteenth century to the present. It is a journey that spans the disciplinary perspectives of art history, material culture, and media studies, demonstrating the rich interplay between these fields in our understanding of Venice's visual history.

Strolling through the lagoon's maze of *calli*, *fondamente*, and *campi,* among the piles of kitschy postcards that hide souvenir shop entrances, the *View of Venice* can still be seen. An iconic representation of the Serenissima during the Renaissance, this urban portrait by the Venetian painter and printmaker Jacopo de' Barbari, commissioned by the German merchant Anton Kolb between ca. 1497 and 1500, shows the water city in its entirety from an imaginative aerial vantage point. Today, more than five hundred years after its first publication, this image is reproduced in a variety of formats: as a postcard to be sold in souvenir shops, as a medium-sized print found in antiquarian bookstores, and a wall map in the lobbies of hotels, museums, and institutional offices. This last celebratory format better reflects the original monumental character of the print, which was made from six pearwood blocks, known as matrices, measuring 140 × 287 cm altogether – an enormous size for the printing techniques of the time. The matrices are now on display at the Correr Museum in Venice.

Since many European and North American collections own early copies of the woodcut *View of Venice*, which helped transform the Renaissance image into a popular motif in the digital age, scholars continue to investigate the aesthetic reasons for its popularity. De' Barbari and Kolb aimed to glorify the Venetian State as Europe's leading commercial and maritime power, but the drawing's composition did not exclusively employ the symbolic vocabulary of an ideal city. Rather, it is a remarkably detailed record of a naturalistic cityscape that functions as a precise topographical document, helpful in tracing how Venice's *forma urbis*, or urban environment, changed over time. Nowadays, art pieces such as the Renaissance *View of Venice* – as well as many architectural views created by Venice's *vedutisti* (city-view painters such as Canaletto, Bellotto, etc.) in the eighteenth century – are used as historical sources by scientists and environmental historians to determine the sea level rise. While the *vedutisti* painted partial scenes of urban life, de' Barbari offers a general overview of Venice, showing its entire urban fabric and, therefore, creating "the only visual testimony of sixteenth-century Venice in its entirety",[1] as the curators of the Museum Correr point out. To represent Venice as a homogeneous whole, the printmaker probably used ground surveys and tower-based observations before positioning a virtual vantage point ca. 500 m above the island of San Clemente, modifying the codes of linear perspective to make the entire urban structure visible. At the same time, he promoted the image of Venice as an island, an idealized self-contained republic. The flatness of the lagoon's natural environment, which was excluded from the view, also determined such a distant vantage point, which was much higher compared to contemporary views of other Italian cities. For these reasons, although De' Barbari and Kolb's *View of Venice* was simply titled VENETIE MD, it is considered one of the first examples of a bird's-eye view. In Western art, this is the representation of an

1 https://correr.visitmuve.it/en/il-museo/layout-and-collections/venetian-culture/.

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urban scene seen from above, from an oblique perspective: an artistic genre that became particularly popular in the nineteenth century, when cities were represented through a 'vista a volo d'uccello', 'veau à vol d'oiseau', 'vista de pajaro', 'Vogelschau', – indeed, a bird's-eye view.

The revolutionary scientific and artistic virtuosity of VENETIE MD makes this bird's-eye view a benchmark for all the subsequent cartographic projects of the Venetian Lagoon. Even in the 1980s, when the City Planning Department commissioned a new photomap of the Venetian urban space, this new cartographic system was publicly referred to as "Jacopo de' Barbari's technological heir". Known as *Fotopiano*, the descendant of the Renaissance bird's-eye view was actually a colour photomosaic of 1,129 vertical shots taken by an airplane of the Parma Aerial Surveying Company, which created a map of the historic settlements at a scale of 1:500. Aerophotogrammetric techniques provided detailed, accurate, and measurable information about a specific location, thus functioning as an instrument for the city government. In other words, according to its promoters, the *Fotopiano* was able to combine the rigour of science with the beauty of form, producing an 'operational image' of Venice's modern *forma urbis*.

A term coined by the filmmaker, artist, and writer Harun Farocki, operational images are "pictures that are part of an operation" and aim to monitor, detect, and control rather than represent, depict, and entertain. Media theorist Jussi Parikka extends Farocki's theorization of operational images beyond military and managerial contexts by reflecting on the production of scientific knowledge, including climate models, weather reports, planetary-scale computational systems, and their complex political and aesthetic implications. Within the proposed Anthropocene epoch, the bird's-eye view has shifted from an elevated, oblique perspective of urban scenes to a vertical gaze that produces detailed aerial and satellite images taken perpendicular to the Earth's surface and valued for their measurability. In this context, images from outer space have become 'environing media', essential for reading the scale on which climate change is occurring, as well as valuable tools for communicating the environmental crisis to the public.

However, the peculiarity of aerial photography and satellite imagery has been realized in the military context of two World Wars and the Cold War, which have also implicated 'the view from above' in the idea of a cold, detached, and hunting gaze. Post-colonial and ecofeminist studies have criticized the use of NASA's Apollo photographs (whole-Earth images such as *Blue Marble*, 1972) to symbolize the emergence of the 'global environment', the concept of Gaia, and the Anthropocene, claiming that the cyberoptimism about the Blue Planet still conceals the imperialist ideology of the space race. Donna Haraway has shown that extraterrestrial photographs imply a sort of 'God trick': the illusion of the disembodied, totalizing, and static gaze of technoscience. On the one hand, the constant monitoring of the Earth from space serves to scientifically understand and mitigate the effects of climate change and anthropic transformations. On the other hand, the cosmic vista has been criticized for publicly conveying a disembodied perspective that sublimates technology without investigating the responsibility for environmental degradation – and thus hides human and animal suffering.

Remote sensing, especially satellite imaging, is also increasingly employed to monitor what is now considered a fragile ecosystem, the Venetian Lagoon. One of the first scientific books on *Remote Sensing of Environment*, written by the geologist Joseph Lintz and the geographer David S. Simonett in 1976, reported:

> Venice is being virtually destroyed [for the effects of huge industrial complexes]. The causes of this process can be observed and measured by remote sensing systems. Without such measurements it will not be possible to regulate, plan, or design methods to prevent such tragedies from occurring.

Venice has recently become an official site for the Crew Earth Observations (CEO) team, which carries out human-operated remote sensing from the International Space Station. The circulation of images of the lagoon from above on many digital platforms has contributed to transforming the public image of the Venetian Lagoon into a paradigmatic environment whose delicate equilibrium must be preserved from the effects of the global ecological crisis. Moreover, unlike de' Barbari's *View*, satellite images position the city of Venice within its broader ecosystem. When the 'stones of Venice' – namely, the city's architectural masterpieces, to use the title of John Ruskin's book title – are scaled down, what emerges is the lagoonscape.

A direct bird's-eye view of this lagoonscape can be experienced today thanks to the opening of the Marco Polo airport, built on the Tessera salt marshes in 1961. Although air travel, along with the cruise industry, has become a symbol of destructive mass tourism and a sector that should be decarbonized, flying to Venice has given many visitors the opportunity to admire the water city from above and to visually position the historic city centre in relation to its natural and industrial surroundings. Before gliding on former marshland like a seagull – a metaphor often used to promote the construction of the airport – the plane approaches the island city, passing by the huge industrial plants in Marghera, on the mainland. From above, the sinuosity of the natural little channels (*ghebi*) that divides the brackish marshess (*barene*), the most peculiar amphibious environments of the Venetian Lagoon, contrasts with the straight linearity of human intervention on the territory. According to the philosopher Rosario Assunto, who has written extensively on landscape aesthetics, the unity between the city and the waterscape – "as if it were the water itself in the lagoon landscape metamorphosing into the buildings" (Assunto 1973, 48; author's transl.) – was irreparably lost when the megalopolis of Mestre-Marghera began to grow exponentially on the mainland in the 1960s. Eighteenth-century visitors described Venice as a city that spontaneously emerged from the water "almost by evaporation and condensation" (49; author's transl.) in a visual connection with the green mainland. Today, however, an absolute visual discontinuity can be observed from above, even though Mestre, Marghera, and the historic islands are part of the same municipality (*comune*), which includes most of the Venetians living on the mainland.

Analysing the waterscape from an aerial perspective can raise new research questions. On the morning of 13 October 2023, Marco Polo Airport was closed due to a massive flock of seagulls that put flight maneuvers at risk of bird strikes. This incident reminds us that human air routes meet and sometimes collide with birds' flyways. For safety reasons, aviation today tries to be as bird-free as possible, but the ability of birds to fly has inspired humans for centuries. The natural salt marshes surrounding the airport along the lagoon are critical to the ecosystem. They buffer tidal currents and support fish habitats and a vast bird population. Therefore, near the airport, birdwatchers can easily observe herons, cormorants, shelducks, marsh harriers, sandpipers, greenshanks, plovers, and terns.

Visual sources trace the presence of the avifauna in the lagoon – Vittore Carpaccio's *Hunting on the Lagoon* being one of the earliest examples, circa 1495. The utilitarian (mainly food) value of the avifauna was the subject of visual representations until the first half of the twentieth century. On the contrary, from the 1970s onward, observing and photographing the birds of the lagoon for their aesthetic qualities became increasingly popular and developed a new awareness of environmental conservation. One of the most extensive wetlands in Europe, and one of the most important in Italy, the Venetian Lagoon is a protected habitat and is listed as a 'priority site for conservation' in the European Union's Habitats Directive. A part of the Venetian Lagoon has also been declared a wildlife sanctuary by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and is protected by the EU Birds Directive because it is a crucial site for numerous species of coastal wintering, migratory, and breeding waterbirds.

Given that the contemporary bird's-eye view has become increasingly distant, reaching into outer space through sophisticated recording technology, one might

ask: Where is the bird in the bird's-eye view? The challenge for the future views of the Venetian Lagoon is to take into account the more-than-human others. The hydrodynamics and geomorphologic transformations of the lagoon, as well as the more-than-human world, can be explored by using multi-species methods and positioning birds as subjects capable of taking us from the atmosphere to the hydro-sphere and vice versa. Trying to understand these animals can lead us into inaccessible spaces of wetlands, showing the power relations in the management of these environments, new levels of toxicity, as well as measures to reduce the detrimental effects of human actions on the ecosystem. Ultimately, the lagoon's waters always reflect the sky… and the sky is also the space of waterbirds (hunted, invasive, or protected).

Through various visual depictions of Venice and its lagoon created over the centuries, this essay has described contrasting human interpretations of the water city: a glorious maritime power in the past and a fragile ecosystem today. By analysing the different ideas embedded in the Venetian natural-cultural landscapes, this text has also shown that images are not only symbolic, but can also serve as support for operational activities (urban planning, environmental monitoring, engineering projects, security applications, etc.). In particular, views of Venice from above, also called bird's-eye views, have often been used to graphically and photographically represent and manage the lagoon environment, which, due to its morphological flatness, could only be grasped in its entirety from an elevated position. In the Anthropocene, the bird's-eye view has reached outer space, producing detailed satellite images valued for their scientific measurability, but also criticized for providing a disembodied perspective that fails to investigate environmental injustice. This essay concludes by proposing a new ecological reading of the Venetian Lagoon that takes into account more-than-human geographies, starting from the many species of real birds that have often been overlooked in the human interpretation of the bird's-eye view offered so far.

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