

Holding images

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«Images—a pervasive presence, an immediate and a trustworthy realm providing an impression of evident naturalness. But also a realm full of discourses, influencing the construction and idea of the reality it seemingly merely represents, and a realm that could be tapped into to propose alternative visions of space, fostering both a rereading and a potential rewriting of that very reality.»

HOLDING IMAGES

Galaad Van Daele

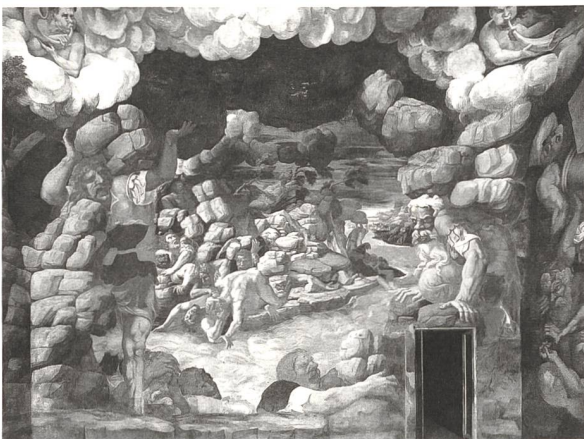
Galaad Van Daele, born 1988, studied architecture and architectural research at École Nationale Supérieure de Paris-La Villette (from which he graduated in 2013) and TU Berlin. Parallel to his practice as an architect, he has been teaching at ETH Zurich as part of Chair An Fonteyne since 2017, and follows an independent research trajectory focusing on the study of space as an aesthetic construct under iconographic influence, by blending theoretical reflection with spatial and visual practice.

I Image-spaces

In Palazzo Te—one of Duke Federico Gonzaga's palaces in Mantua, Italy—after walking through a succession of monumental chambers, one enters a room: the Sala dei Giganti. Like the rest of the palazzo and of its pictorial program, it was conceived and executed between 1524 and 1534 by court artist Giulio Romano. It depicts the fall of the Giants, the rebellious sons of the Earth, who after trying to reach Mount Olympus by piling mountain upon mountain, ended up being struck by Zeus' lightning bolt and came crashing down in a chaos of rocks, ruins and limbs.

The space, in its initial state, was a continuous representational surface, as described in Vasari's *Life* of Giulio Romano: «And what is most marvellous to see in this work is that the whole painting has neither beginning nor end but is all interconnected and smoothly continuous, with no ornamental partitions or boundaries [...]. Hence that room, which is no more than thirty feet long, seems like open country; and then, too, the floor being composed of pebbles set evenly, and the lower part of the upright walls being painted with similar-looking stones, no sharp angle visible, [...] the surface appears to be one vast expanse.»⁽¹⁾ As described here, Romano purposely designed the room to support the effect of the painted scene and create this striking statement of might and grandeur for the small duchy, and for the Duke, the local Zeus, who had taken Mount Olympus as his emblem. The vaulted ceiling, the partially smoothed out angles and, back then, the floor made of rocks, the formless stone fireplace, the painted doors and shutters functioned as extensions of the painted walls, creating a seamless continuum merging the reality of the viewer and that of the painting. Inescapable, the scene placed anyone standing in the room at the centre of the action, in the midst of the battle, watched by countless giant eyes: watched by the images.

This room is an example of what one could call *image-spaces*: rooms such as chapels covered in frescoes prescribing vices and virtues, *studioli* lined with figurative panels depicting the cultural inclinations of its commissioner, assembly halls wrapped in allegories formulating a certain vision of the state, all fraught with the aspirations and contradictions of their context. Such spaces were produced in large numbers in Italy at the hinge between late Middle Ages and early modern period, a moment full of rivalry and new discourses often deployed by means of images in space. The Sala, like other image-spaces, is a critical space, a borderline-figure bringing images to their limit and architecture to its edge, organizing a meeting point of the iconographic and spatial fields, thus exposing their mechanism of mutual influence.



Giulio Romano,
Sala dei Giganti (west wall), Palazzo

Image-spaces are not just collections of individual representations, but constructed and complex combinations which, in addition to the messages they convey, build implicit frames and structures, meanings and values, influence behaviours, allow or restrict practices, supporting a discourse on space and reality at large. Spaces which, in the end, speak of space and reveal what images actively do: to build reality, or rather «a» reality.

II Reality

In *«La Fabrique des images»*, French anthropologist Philippe Descola reflects on this way images have of embedding visions of the self and of the physical world, stating that observing them allows to make out the «framework of reality»⁽²⁾, a phrase that confirms the potency of spaces like the Sala dei Giganti.

Images come between us and the confusion of the external world, as ways of processing our perceptions. As Michel Foucault writes in *«The Order of Things»*, «the image is the general notion [...] that holds the world together with figures of «knowledge»»⁽³⁾ This makes them the stuff of reality, fixating impressions that can then be passed around—scientific images, distant lands, extensive digital world mapping, snapshots showing who is who and what is what—composing an extended «second hand» reality, claiming a presence of the real within representation, a presence one chooses to believe in. Those can then be accessed over and over again thanks to our memory, our books, our photo albums, or lately our touchscreens, which act as summoning surfaces for those latent images, pulled from the depths of the world wide web, from the nebulous digital memory, selected by specifically engineered algorithms, constructing an internet-reality on the changing faces of our phones and computers, where software windows cast realistic shadows on virtual desktops.

Images show us what can be, and by doing so they generate in parallel a constant crisis of representations: a tension between prevailing images, accepted as natural and blinding us to the possibility of otherness; and this very otherness, unrepresented but always there, emerging by force, standing in the way and therefore rejected, too subversive, unacceptable.

«Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures ‘made in the image’ of a creator, to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image.»⁽⁴⁾ Images as pieces, fragments bound together to produce reality, a greater image, a «state of affairs» full of discourses, loaded with utterances, a voice that arises from all the mixed choruses emitted by our icons.



Camille Flammarion, *L'Atmosphère*, illustration of *Météorologie Populaire*, 188



Tropical Islands Resort, Krausnick, Germany. Photograph: Gerd Danigel

III Casting veils

So what we do is to walk around, surrounded by a nebula of latent concept-images, of models, to be brandished and projected, wrapped around things, affected to objects thus made recognizable, going from unknown to known: like Athena whispering in Ulysses' ear, dissipating the mist, allowing him to suddenly recognize Ithaca. A process of matching, of identification of things to known families of forms: every time, suddenly, the image actualizes itself within new boundaries.

This ambiguous relationship between images and externality, this position half within and half without, is beautifully described by Paul Celan in his *«Conversation in the Mountains»*: «But they, those cousins, have no eyes, alas. Or more exactly: they have, even they have eyes, but with a veil hanging in front of them, no, not in front, behind them, a moveable veil. No sooner does an image enter than it gets caught in the web, and a thread starts spinning, spinning itself around the image, a veil thread; spins itself around the image and begets a child, half image, half veil.»⁽⁵⁾

A play of projection, perception and re-projection, by all of us, constantly, where images as veils move from the outside in, from the inside out, and back again, in a constant and mutual dialogue between physical object and conventional image, until one does not know anymore where it started.



Matthaeus Greuter, *Le Médecin guarissant Phantasie*, circa 1600

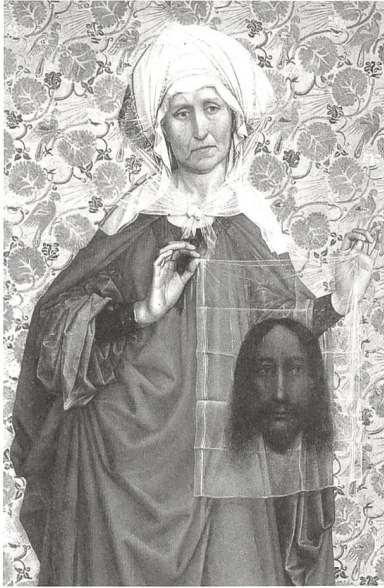


Giuseppe Sanmartino, *Cristo velato*, 1753

IV Holding images

The deep meaning of the word *«reality»* is utterly related to possession, and the definition of reality as *«what exists»* only appears quite recently, in the 17th century. The initial meaning derives from the Proto-Indo-European root *«*reh₁ís»*, designating wealth or goods: something one possesses. Reality, then, as a collection of things that are owned, that are ruled over, that are *«held»*.

The Sala dei Giganti and other above-mentioned examples of Italian image-spaces were built just as conical perspective—a mode of representation that remains ubiquitous to this day—was spreading. While taking shape in painting, it gradually became a new perceptual framework, ending up deeply influencing the way in which space is regarded. Perspective implies a point of view—that of an individual viewer, standing alone at the tip of the cone—and produces images containing the world in a rational, mathematical framework. What perspectival representation shows, it seems, can be nothing but reality—immediate, trustworthy—when it is, in fact, only a certain reality, one that from the West went on to conquer the world: a representational imperialism, which forever *«denies its own artificiality.»*⁽⁶⁾



Robert Campin, *Saint Veronica*, circa 1430



Taddeo di Bartolo, *San Gimignano enthroned with eight stories of his life*, 1401

Yet, images are always held by someone—commissioner, painter, photographer—from beneath, in a concealed manner. The holders evaporate, leaving the ‘beholders’ unaware of the genesis of the discourse they are subjected to. As W.J.T. Mitchell puts it in *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, «the effect of this invention was nothing less than to convince an entire civilization that it possessed an infallible method of representation, a system for the automatic and mechanical production of truths about the material and the mental worlds.»⁽⁷⁾ Humans, then, as image-bearers, using them as screens saturated with ideological statements, acting as interfaces between their inner world and the external world they conquered and own.

This relationship between perspective (or images at large) and ideology is developed at length by Mitchell, who states that «the orthodox view is that ideology is false consciousness, a system of symbolic representations that reflects a historical situation of domination by a particular class, and which serves to conceal the historical character and class bias of that system under guises of naturalness and universality.»⁽⁸⁾ The one that rules is therefore the one that holds, allows, makes a system of representations accessible and therefore dominant. In authoritarian regimes: the state? And elsewhere: digital corporations? For who is it, otherwise, that disseminate myriads of self-validating images of truth by allowing the general public to reach for them anytime, anywhere?

However, this act of holding images, beyond a cynical endeavour of conquest and persuasion, is also a primitive coping mechanism, a mechanism that holds. «Models mean compression, and as such they allow to manage masses of data and tasks. Using them is to refuse dismay, if not fear.»⁽⁹⁾ Images build reality, so they too, literally, hold it: they keep it together, contain it, resist the pressure of the unknowable pushing from within.

V Harnessing images

This primitive dimension of images is pointed out by W.J.T. Mitchell when he calls images a fetish, thus highlighting an almost magical power which is given to them. An active injection, which is then obliterated, as «the magic of the fetish depends on the projection of consciousness into the object, and then a forgetting of that act of projection.»⁽¹⁰⁾

So, let us try to remember, to look at the representational paradigms of space that saturate us, to accept their historical, ideological, situated quality, and challenge them. «Suppose we began to think of our ordinary, rational behaviour with images as just a bit strange, as

permeated with odd, cultish prejudices and ideological determinations? [...] [It] might put us in a position to take a critical view of imagery, to see it in its cultural and historical relations, not just as part of nature, but as part of us.»⁽¹¹⁾

Seeing the fundamental role of images in the construction of space and reality at large is to understand that those cannot be fully grasped without being observed under an iconic angle. That means working <on> images of space, for «if we can understand how images have come to possess their present power over us, we may be in a position to repossess the imagination that produces them.»⁽¹²⁾

And to do so, our best allies would be images themselves, those powerful artefacts that manage to effortlessly persuade and distil seemingly unquestionable impressions of the world. That means working <with> images of space. By combining them with text, one can exploit both the structured sequentiality, the determinate quality, the clear concepts of language, and the indeterminate, nebulous, simultaneous expressivity and density of visual images, tightly associating those two poles, juxtaposing them, overlapping them, to allow a synergic relation to arise. A way to bridge the gap between what is only sayable and what is only showable, with images speaking in their own voice, beyond illustration, like strong, self-supporting beings, achieving «a merging of the aesthetic and the cognitive, with the possibility of interplay between philosophy and metaphor, science and art.»⁽¹³⁾ A relationship «in which language or imagery looks into its own heart and finds lurking there its opposite number,»⁽¹⁴⁾ assisting a critical enterprise on the representation of space and its effects.

Harnessing the capabilities of images in the frame of a pictorial turn applied to the study of space opens up the possibility of an analytical discourse on architecture, on the city, on landscape, that remembers that these spheres are shaped by images, which may thus hold many keys to their understanding. A discourse that could be called a <spatial iconology>: looking at the <logos> of <icons> of space. A look that exposes images, not just by striving to understand what they show, but really what they do, what they reveal of the endeavours of their makers, and of an overall civilizational direction and spatial ethos. A critical look at representations as reality-components, at what they imply, and at what they built.

Then, finally, to reveal and to undo, one must tackle images beyond those stages of iconographic collection and transversal analysis; one must go one step deeper, entering the realm of iconographic production, of new images proposing challenging discourses, defusing rigid and stale representations; one must make images contemplating the margin of things, the periphery of spatial figures, their moments of unclarity, or failure. Use estrangement, as formulated by Viktor Shklovsky in his <*Theory of Prose*>, or how verbal and visual images manage to go beyond automated perceptions, which «devour things».⁽¹⁵⁾ To slow them down and make reality unfamiliar again, open for re-readings and rearrangements. A movement questioning the stability of representations, revealing the edge of figures and the places where they fray, thus inaugurating a process of reinterpretation going beneath the surface and fostering a gradual reform of our reality. A production of critical images, of counter images which, beyond description, show the otherness, the strangeness of our spaces, pushing them on the verge of collapse, recasting the veils and stimulating new alternative visions. A reclaiming of images, held consciously, this time, in plain sight, as building blocks of an <other> reality.



