

After a rain the rainbow came out, I went closer to get a better view of it, and at one point I saw its end. Two worlds appeared, the world of evil and the world of good, separated as two parts of a sandwich. First I went to look at the world of good, and then that of evil. They seemed so equal but also so different. In both worlds there was too much good and too much evil. (ZG)

Writing by Images, Thinking by Images

Luca Galofaro

0. Introduction

1. Montage as a theoretical form
2. The rules for the construction of an image
3. The nature of the Images

0. Introduction

The term 'form' has entered criticism in such a pervasive manner that today we cannot talk about architecture without resorting to it. In the history of philosophy, the word 'form' has taken on different meanings. In this history, the contribution of Kant's thought was to establish that form is in the act of looking, and not in the thing looked at; and insofar as the mind recognizes the beauty of objects, it sees within them a representation of that form, independently of content and meaning.¹

We are surrounded by forms.

It is essential now for an architect to know how to look, to select fragments, metabolize his ideas, and then give, build his own space; form is nothing more than a device of thought, and as such it cannot have a specific existence prior to thought.

Since thought is born and develops around a single image, the image changes, takes on meanings and is structured in infinite combinations; form, in its becoming, continuously changes until it

¹ Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

reaches a point where the idea takes over, without postulating the existence of an absolute ideal category, accessible only to thought.

I am interested in the moment in which this accumulation becomes formless. That formless – so dear to Bataille – which continues to produce with a rhythmic pattern in which forms are canceled and reappear, exuberant, excessive; it proliferates, generating lacerated and open forms with an explosive process. The formless, in fact, is the accident of forms, their contingent rather than substantial condition, since, when one refers to this term, it must be understood as an adjective and not as a noun.²

A structure of indeterminate form, capable of infinite combinations; an image therefore produces infinite images, which become a conceptual model on which to base the project.

The Image connects thought and action; the image – as Jean-Luc Godard said – does not belong to those who make it, but to those who use it. Every creative act is reduced to a recombination of earlier creations.

The iconic ecosystem of the contemporary world pushes us towards recycling and remixing.

The politics of the image are linked, rather than to excess, to the ability to discard, remove, or censor them. The model of the human eye as a device of vision is waning, replaced by a new logic of visual production that favors bringing images into existence by constructing them from pre-existing ones. I look for images through my work. I look for them, in order to give them new life and new meanings.

The idea of bringing a sleeping image back to life by carefully extracting it from an archive brought me to the theme of the multiple incarnations of the image. Because images are nothing but screens on which we project our identity and our memory, what we are made of.

From the found image starts the process of construction of the project through a series of new images. What has become important to me is the dialogue established between the original and the manipulated image, the dialectical image that was so dear to Benjamin. This vortex-image, as Walter Benjamin called it, is not an imitation of things but a line between things; my architect's thought is slowly built from this separation line.

² Cecilia Alemani, "L'informe: un percorso tra le pagine di *Documents*", in *Itinera. Rivista di Arte e Letteratura*, February 2002. <http://www.filosofia.unimi.it/itinera/mat/saggi/alemanic_informe.pdf>

Collages are for me the shape of an idea, the story of a journey, a way of putting thoughts together.

There is no rule; there are only directions to be followed.

Postcards, books, newspapers, magazines, photographs, are fragments collected over time, starting points, the beginning of projects. The montage of the fragments I collect, have been or will become a project.

I am interested in the form of montage as a tool for thought, not as language.

The collages I produce are always different, as they are made with different instruments; the images composed by hand or through the digital tools always adapt to an idea of space, they represent its potential.

The accompanying text tries to harmonize with the image. Sometimes it is just the incipit of a text never completed; in other cases it is a tale of architecture, travel, projects, people and meetings; or it simply takes the form of essay.

1. Montage as a theoretical form

We live in an era in which looking has become the most widespread form of perception. The world appears to us filtered through all kinds of images. The real almost vanishes, and we are shaped by its collective representation. Thus, even the channels of memory are increasingly linked to repeated images rather than recollections. Images are an obligatory point of contact between human beings and the real. *Never before, as in recent decades, have seeing and looking so fully coincided with knowing.*

To know the world, then, is to understand ourselves, as we inhabit it on an everyday basis, first of all as observers. Action and its restitution in the visible field are irremediably the way we relate to each other.

The images with which we come into contact at every moment of the day are the direct visual projection of what we hold inside ourselves; they are fragments of our memory, thoughts that very often influence our way of making architecture more than actual experience.

There is no reality without image. There is no image without subject. And each subject is forced into this continuous confrontation.

The risk at this point is that these images may reduce our perceptual abilities. This is why it is necessary to construct a mode of confrontation and thinking connected with the images themselves. There can be no result of a cognitive process that does not also and at the same time refer back to the very process that generated it.

Images are the product of different techniques; what interests me is, images that are manipulated, used to produce new meanings; images that have undergone a transformation through montage. It is only after this type of appropriation that images take on subjective meaning; only in this way the objectual character of vision is overcome. Only in this way perception may cease to be exclusively a process of archiving without interpretation.

There may be different types of montage. They act on the image as object, or on a set of images selected and laid out according to a set order. Therefore they construct a sequence that is repeated within my archive.

Montage, therefore, is an ordering principle of the reality that surrounds me.

Photography is an image without a code. Although it is clear that certain codes influence its interpretation, they do not consider the photograph to be a copy of the real, but rather an emanation of the real past: a kind of magic, not an art.

Wondering whether photography is analogical or coded is not a way to find a good criterion for analysis. What matters is that photography should have documentary force, and that the documentary character of photography bears not on the object but on time. "From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation."³

An example of montage I often refer to is the one theorized first by Aby Warburg⁴ and later by Georges Didi-Huberman.⁵ Both turned the use of images into a research tool. These two figures enabled me to trace my own path of analysis and interpretation of the world and beyond.

Didi-Huberman seems to be primarily interested in the reading and use of images, rather than their ontological status as pure, simple forms of the real.

³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* [1980] (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), p. 89.

⁴ Aby Warburg, *L'Atlas Mnémosyne*, with an essay by Roland Recht (Paris: L'Écarquillé / INHA, 2012).

⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, ed., *Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back?* (Madrid: TF Editores / Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2010).

According to these interpretative lines, photographs are models to which it is possible to attribute meanings that are different from those obtained at first reading.

Who looks, and how, are more important than the object to be looked at; in short, this type of montage is done by seeking the material singularity of the visual document, at the same time inserting it in a play of relations capable of producing a true cognitive shock. The archive (the image as pure object, a datum linked to its iconic meaning) and the montage (the placement of that same datum inside a dialectical system) are the two essential poles of looking in the contemporary world.

Montage is a discursive practice focused on the presence of the gap, the interruption, on a continuous *découpage* (carving) and *remontage* (reassembling), an accumulation of “symptoms” more than of “data”, of unexpected motifs, utterly transversal relations reconfigured each time inside a process without ever reaching a final solution. Montage seems to be the only critical-visual device to obtain a type of non-standard truth. Working on discontinuity, on the structural breakdown of that image-concept short circuit any visual practice always runs the risk of carrying with it (behind every image the danger always lurks of the mechanical comment, the stereotype), montage becomes a true form of stripping down and providing new garments for the gaze.

If the image as such – as Didi-Huberman wrote in 2000 in *Devant le temps*⁶ – is not an imitation of things, but the interval made visible, the fault line between things, then the gaze too takes on the same meaning. If the image does not spring from an orderly continuum of causes and effects, but is a dialectical vision made up of past and present in perpetual collision, a sudden shock in which one can grasp the lacerating discontinuity of time, then the gaze, the critical gaze, seems to make “collision” the load-bearing factor of its very structure.

There is no single reading, as there is no single possible sequence of images. Each eye, each gaze can be critical in the face of History, literally opening up to a non-standard dimension of vision (and discourse).

My images represent a fault line between memory and project; they are a necessary transit point in order to sediment memory and transform it.

⁶ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps. Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images* (Paris: Minuit, 2000).

Montage takes on great importance in my work, because it is the operative tool, the medium through which to interpret one's personal archive, constructing the annotations that draw an interpretative atlas of the real.

I see montage as an ordering principle, rather than a mere technique of assembly.

Montage is a principle that can put heterogeneous orders of reality in relation to each other, that is, a principle that produces knowledge, precisely as theorized by Aby Warburg with the construction of his *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Montage can be used to establish relationships among a series of fragments belonging to my memory or extracted from reality to be combined, and to define images to be used as models to interpret.

Interpreting a model is what Walter Benjamin, in his essay *On the Mimetic Faculty*, defined as reading “what was never written [...], prior to all languages, from entrails, the stars, or dances.”⁷

Thus considered, montage is a device capable of organizing images by combining them.

It would perhaps be clearer to define this logic as an operation of deconstruction of the reality surrounding us in different temporal domains, a disassembly that conceals within it the need for a reassembly of different times. In fact, the time (of the image) also plays a fundamental role in this *modus operandi*. The time of an image has a dual meaning: that of the moment in which the image is selected, and that of the moment in which it becomes part of the archive (the exact moment in which it becomes memory), to project itself towards another time, that of the moment when the annotations take shape.

The contrast between temporalities creates a new one that does not belong either to the present, or to the past. In *Images in Spite of All*,⁸ Didi-Huberman pointed out that the knowledge that occurs through montage implies that the value of this knowledge cannot be assured by a single image. The images (or fragments of them) thus selected have meaning only if they are juxtaposed with other images.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty” [1933], in *Selected Writings. Volume 2, Part 2: 1927-1934*, ed. by M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, G. Smith (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2005), p. 722.

⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* [2004] (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Montage allows us to reject a rigidly pre-set form – the freedom of routine – and gives us the dynamic faculty of assuming any form.

Speaking of montage, one cannot fail to refer to S.M. Eisenstein. For the Russian director, montage is not a thought composed of pieces in succession, but a thought that arises from the clash of pieces independent of each other, as in Chinese and Japanese writing where meaning is produced by the juxtaposition of logograms placed next to each other.

Two overlaid images, even when having different origin, produce an illusion, a displacement. Everything stems from the non-correspondence between the first image imprinted on paper – and in the memory of those who recognize it – and the second image, initially conceived as a foreign body: the conflict between the two gives rise to sensations, disorientation, curiosity, but also clearly defines concepts on which projects can be built.

Eisenstein came to specify precisely this: that montage emerges from conflict and collision. Montage is always a conflict, a conflict between fragments, a style of writing and a method of investigation aimed at clarifying – in Eisenstein's case – the identity of cinema and its placement in the universal history of art forms. As for Warburg, Didi-Huberman, and Benjamin, it is the encounter with the temporality of the image and of the tools that convey it, that forces history to develop new ways of reconstructing and displaying its constitutive processes. Montage is understood not as a form of artistic composition but as a research tool to navigate the chaos of the history of forms.

Premises that can be found in what Eisenstein called intellectual montage, a montage capable of becoming a form of thought and knowledge, manifested not so much in a linear arrangement of images oriented towards the creation of a narrative continuity, but rather in the exploration of the productive force of conflict, confrontation, collision between heterogeneous elements. Montage is not a thought made up of pieces that follow one another, but a thought originating from the clash of pieces that are independent of each other.

2. Rules for the construction of an image

Montage is the ordering principle that produces new images.

These new images must be hospitable; they must encourage vision, and establish a relationship with the onlooker. It is important to establish a visual dialogue between the space one wants to represent, the idea that tries to shape it, and the context one tries to build as a background. A skill must be demonstrated in recreating a measurable space, and a precise geometric structure. Which does not form space, but structures it.

In other words, when we interpret an image, in fact we are not necessarily looking at it; we are only looking at what that image was meant to show. As soon as the usefulness of the image runs out, we are able to see something else.

The image after montage is transformed into something new... when this operation succeeds, it manages to create an estrangement with regard to what is familiar, and it is a transformation and an invention at the same time.

Montage takes advantage of this indifference to the original subject, redirecting attention from one side to the other.

Building an image actually means to build a project... inhabiting worlds that that do not belong to me... the new context and the new frame (let's not forget that a postcard is actually a window on the real framed for an infinite instant).

Inserting a fragment within the image is a way to free up another space, allowing it to reveal itself by breaking the veil of familiarity. Collage allows one to create the conditions for digression, thus stimulating the attention towards what is involuntary.

The new frame of reference allows for the image to be imagined, experimented, and thought again.

Places

Once the space, and the meaning to be attributed to the image have been suggested, it is necessary to underline the evocative power of the fragment that has been used, in order to grant architecture the power to create a precise identity for the place, identified through the iconic meaning of the building, what I call the construction of an imaginary place.

Alternatively, it could be a hybrid place created by grafting pieces of real buildings as well as parts of buildings that have just been imagined.

At this point, the conception of time – the time of the image, and the time of montage – becomes crucial.

Times

How to evoke time, or rather, how to play with time past by bringing it into the present.

The image can create, structure, or confuse times.

An image is normally a single frame. There are nevertheless many works that can show different narrative episodes simultaneously.

Spaces

Therefore – as I have already said – I am not so much interested in the image that is the result of montage, but rather in the space between images, which I consider the true space for the mind's use.

This space is the place where the certainty of what I see runs up against the doubt about what I seem to see or to have glimpsed, if only for a moment.

It is from this space that images should be observed, in order to be able to assign them a meaning. This device activates spaces of understanding; it creates a physical and mental place, at the same time visible and invisible.

Techniques and supports

In my *modus operandi*, I try to carry out simple operations, derived from the practice of collage, brought up to date in a dialogue between analog and digital.

Many of my montages, in fact, are done by hand and then digitally reproduced. In the moment in which they are reproduced, a catalog of pieces is also established, to be reused several times.

In his book *Between-the-Images*,⁹ Raymond Bellour explains this path, which is not based on the construction of the image but on reading the hidden meanings. Through the invention of a new image, which releases itself in part from its photographic transparency to make room for other materials, a new physicality is introduced. The work on disassembly and montage is precisely

⁹ Raymond Bellour, *Between-the-Images* [1990] (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2012).

this – to succeed in creating a physicality of the object-image that, through its defiguration, opens onto a prefiguration.

The between-images is that space still new enough to be considered as an enigma, but already structured enough to be circumscribed... a reality of the world that, no matter how virtual and abstract it may be, is a reality of image as a possible world.

Montage is a conflict, and as such it is an embodiment of dialectics in images, a dialectic that is always open and never destined to be finally resolved into a synthesis.

It is almost entirely improvised, although there is obviously a preparation, and I define the boundaries of improvisation in advance.

The part of the work that takes the longest time is the selection of the fragments, which is done before selecting the individual supporting images. When I check details too much, the images never seem good to me. Images and fragments are scattered on a large work desk; the assembly of the pieces takes place gradually; I always work on different images at the same time. It is the urge of the moment that determines my decisions. The images are not the result of a graphic composition, but rather the attempt to understand how to look at them.

I always try to bear in mind the project I am working on, because after all the images are not a work in themselves, but they always correspond to my work as an architect.

I try to think in images; imagining the transformation of places and buildings makes visible my idea of architecture and the forms that correspond to it.

I concur with Victor Burgin's statement, "past and present alike are sites of contestation where radically different perspectives collide," and the image "is a process in which memory is invested with the experiential force of present perception."¹⁰

Writing

Up to this point I have focused on the images; but montage is undoubtedly a form of writing, and as such it must also be accompanied by writing in the form of words, i.e., working on images through the filter of their description, adding to the images the narration that produced them. So writing, too, becomes part of this practice. Images are always juxtaposed to a text, a quotation that accompanies them in the archive and in the moment of their cataloging, or a text

¹⁰ David Company, "Victor Burgin: Other Criteria", in *Frieze*, no. 155, April 2013.

introducing the series, that does not intend to explain but to define a field of action of the image itself.

The relentless search for the meaning of recurring forms, that survival (Nachleben) so dear to Warburg, which belongs to the non-linear history, to the open form of the Mnemosyne Atlas, and the elliptical space that housed it.

3. The nature of images

3.1. Postcards

“Our vision is simultaneously determined by the (past) historical structure of the work and by the present structure of the gaze that examines it, in which the accumulated glimpses of history often continue to operate.” (Daniel Arasse)

Writing a postcard is the simplest thing in the world; among other things, it is a very contemporary form of communication; one works on a short text, and with images. Sending a postcard is also a way of trying to stop time, or rather, trying to create a relationship between different times.

I must confess I like accumulating different objects; I try, of course, to curb this attitude. Among these objects are books, postcards, photographs; but it is also difficult for me to separate myself from the fragments that narrate my travels and my interests, the places that fascinate me, my sensations. They are fragments that come from the places I have passed through.

Then one day I began to look at these images, and I tried to get in tune with them; I looked for something else in the framings, I saw different projects emerge, almost by chance.

At first I started to transform them: I wrote them for friends looking for words, but also trying to build the images on the back with fragments of photographs.

Mine was a form of ‘other’ writing, an attempt to impress in my memory certain signs that would evoke others, in an endless game. A journey through the territories of Architecture.

I intervened on the ground of the image; I did not use words, but fragments of architecture that came into contact with the times of the image, producing new meanings, reflections and interpretations.

Rather than using montage in its digital form, I needed to compose it by hand, with what I found, to weave again the worn links between the world (which changes quickly) and memory. In fact, the past interests me only if it lasts long, and if it can be combined with the present.

The postcard is simply “a print on a semi-rigid support for postal use for non-confidential correspondence.”¹¹

By making my personal public archive, I try to revitalize this object, giving new life to memory, but also to my present.

A postcard in the time of text messages and e-mails represents the revenge of concrete relationships. Just as manual operation is an attempt to respond with the slow time of montage to the proliferation of digital images. The montage for me is a form of drawing.

It is easy to buy a series of postcards on the web; more difficult to actually find them in street markets. So I am not looking for them on the web, it's the images that find me every Sunday. Once found, the images turn into real possibilities for the project.

As William Blake wrote, a postcard of postcards in which these fragments meet.

My postcards are ‘other’ places of the imaginary that contain real places, amplifying some of their features, while rejecting others.

They tell of an idea of Weak Architecture born as a reflection of codified images, an architecture emerging from the context, from its forms, from the life that I imagine taking place inside.

It is always necessary to profane the original images as well as the old books and architecture magazines from which the fragments used in the montages are drawn. To profane in the sense that Giorgio Agamben means when he writes, “Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use.”¹²

The idea of returning images of cities to use, instead of consuming their effects, is a necessary attitude. Putting together fragments, mixing them to one's memories in order to better

¹¹ Sébastien Lapaque, *Teoria della cartolina* [*Théorie de la carte postale*, 2014] (Milan: Archinto, 2015).

¹² Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation”, in *Profanations* [2005] (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 77.

assimilate them. Looking for other cities in the city, other works of art in its art, other architectures in its architecture. A writing in images, a personal history, which exploits imagination to tell other stories.

To quote Agamben again: “If, today, consumers in mass society are unhappy, it is not only because they consume objects that have incorporated within themselves their own inability to be used. It is also, and above all, because they believe they are exercising their right to property on these objects, because they have become incapable of profaning them.

The impossibility of using has its emblematic place in the Museum. The museification of the world is today an accomplished fact. One by one, the spiritual potentialities that defined the people’s lives – art, religion, philosophy, the idea of nature, even politics – have docilely withdrawn into the Museum. ‘Museum’ here is not a given physical space or place but the separate dimension to which what was once – but is no longer – felt as true and decisive has moved. In this sense, the Museum can coincide with an entire city [...], a region [...], and even a group of individuals (insofar as they represent a form of life that has disappeared). But more generally, everything today can become a Museum, because this term simply designates the exhibition of an impossibility of using, of dwelling, of experiencing.”¹³

Therefore, profaning as a new possibility for images, to be inhabited once again.

The postcard as a form of museum of the real, as a tool to return to looking at the cities; and architecture represented, as a determined physical space.

3.2. Paper Works

“The combination of images does not matter how different they are, always produces a modification, an opening of our gaze... Every image must be understood as a montage of different, even contradictory places and times... In front of an image, one must not only wonder what history it documents, and what history it is contemporary with; but also what memory it sediments, and of what removed that image is the return... Raising an other memory that reconfigures the present.” (Georges Didi-Huberman)

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation”, in *Profanations* [2005] (New York: Zone Books, 2007), pp. 83-4.

The *Paper Works* accentuate the graphic appearance of montages. The individual fragments are compared, not with images encoded in our memory, but with other fragments.

In this kind of collage, the origin of the individual fragments is important, it emerges from the archive - magazines, books and newspapers. The selection takes place every day, and it comes from a constant comparison between nature and architecture, a combination of elements that defines an abstract landscape in which the image loses the dimension of encoded and recognizable place, the background is a neutral field, the figure emerges almost by chance.

These combinations, the result of a series of grafts, investigate new figures. In these images, the correspondences of lines and shapes try and seduce the mind of the onlooker, first forced to a work of extraction, and then of reconstruction of the dominant image.

The dominant image escapes continually; it is never clear and definitive, and it continually defers the process of identification because of its extreme ambiguity.

3.3. Glass Boxes

The *Glass Boxes* are born from the transition from analog to digital; the images are manipulated by means of the software.

Once reproduced, these images take on a different appearance, being printed on a rigid and transparent support, the glass.

The physicality of the work is difficult to reproduce in two dimensions; this is why I started to try and restore the three-dimensional quality to the image by printing on overlapping plates.

Thanks to the overlaying of the plates, the fragments regain their singularity, and become part of a complex system.

In my *modus operandi*, I am attracted by certain operations that characterize the form of the collage, but at the same time can be a way of constructing an architectural model.

The digital images come from the overlaying of planes. The printing on glass retains this layering, and the image loses its graphic value, becoming a device capable of producing variations; the image can be looked at from different points of view. In front of the image, and behind the image. Thus the image is never completed and always awaiting.

The meaning changes according to the side from which one looks at it.

The technical device does not produce the image but coincides with it, becoming a sort of screen capable of creating a visual system to be interpreted continuously. The onlooker's gaze perceives one layer instead of another, making the vision dynamic.

This device is a fragile system that is no longer able to rearrange itself into a single thing, because unity no longer exists; the forms of representation no longer have a single meaning. The layers play on a dialectical level, and meanings emerge in the space between the planes.

In short, for an instant that could last a lifetime, one are faced with an invented, "de-figured" image, whose strength lies in what it comes from... a latent energy of lines and expanses, touches and points, something like a pattern removed from the action in progress, but which is therefore its power.

My latest work, the mirrors in the Antonio Lupi Collection, was born from the *Glass Boxes*. In this series of objects, the real becomes part of the image, transforming it continuously. Mirrored fragments are superimposed on the images; the space that surrounds the image enters the image itself, incessantly transforming it. The idea of turning some of these works into furnishings was a natural consequence. Turning an image used for thinking architecture into an everyday object, a bridge between imagination and life. The transformation of the image into a micro-architecture.