An ATLAS of Imagination

by Luca Galofaro

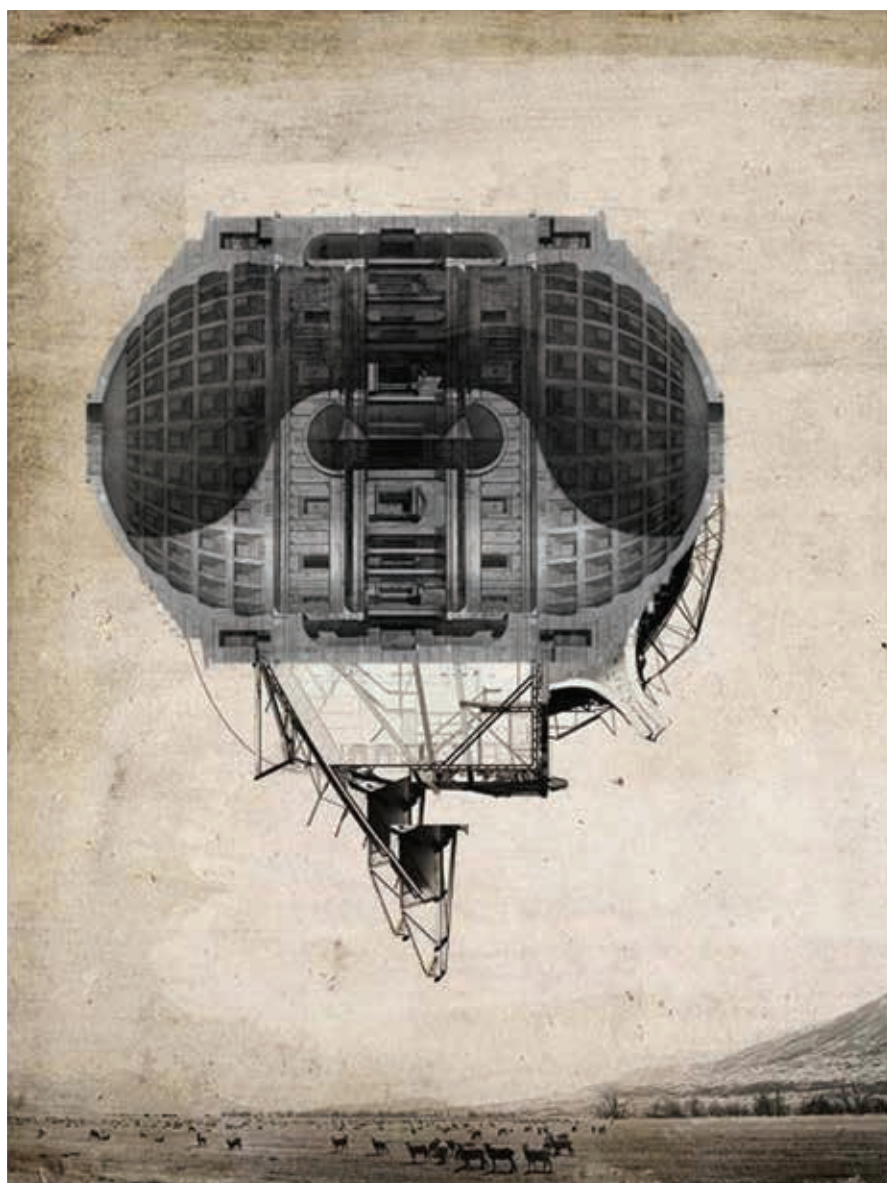# Contents

The Images choose us, we should let them speak.
Carlo Ginzburg

The individual image, removed from its context in the group, is a fragments.
Lewis Baltz

I think of them as parts of a novel I'm doing
William Eggleston's

to Sofia e Zoe for the stolen time

We have to produce images that from object we look at, became subjects able to involve the viewer, images ripping a possibility of imagination to reality.

Montage is the art that is capable of making the image dialectic. Assembling images as I do in my work does not mean assimilating them to fit them into a logical narrative plot, but juxtaposing single fragments, conserving their multiplicity, partiality and impurities to make their combination or repetition generate an interference with or a reaction to my imagination, opening up new possible relationships and knowledge.Montage thus produces an imagination that is an integral part of knowledge.

The images are not sufficient on their own, they are always juxtaposed or, more precisely, collided with short phrases taken from the books of the time, words to read in order to amplify the effect of the image, not to assert a truth but to trigger a visual moment of awareness. It is only through this dialectic restitution that the image can take on a new legibility.

Didi-Huberman says that our era is one of lacerated imagination; every day we are surrounded by a mass of images: clichés, stereotypes, repetitive pictures, images already seen that impact each moment and literally suffocate us. It is a world orientated towards viewing taken to extremes, which in the end shows us nothing. All this creates an inurement that makes us consider images not very important from a cognitive standpoint, as mere representations, reproductions of external reality. When heterogeneous archived images are collided with each other, juxtaposed to form a mnestic atlas that avoids any project of sequential order, a new image is produced that takes on a new meaning.

In a certain sense it is the attempt to construct an atlas of one's own imagination, whose reference point is Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas, but with the difference that the images juxtaposed in this Atlas have first been manipulated and personalized through an operation of assimilation.

The dialectical method of montage through the juxtaposition of different materials brings out instantaneous connections of meaning and new temporalities. Every montage has to do with memory, which is not the conscious memory of our recollections, but the unconscious, deep and over-determined memory that suddenly surfaces

when we come across something that interests us.To talk about an ethic of the images therefore means talking about a politics of survivals that dialectically leads back to the past to act in the present and open to the future.In images the past does not stop reconfiguring itself and intertwining itself with the present and with future projections, thus making the history of images complex, open, disoriented.

Standing before the image means being faced with a complex time. This is why we need to open our thought to new models of temporality capable of doing justice to the anachronisms and vital forces at work in images.

Microutopie 01- 2012 (with a photo fragments by Stefano Cerio)
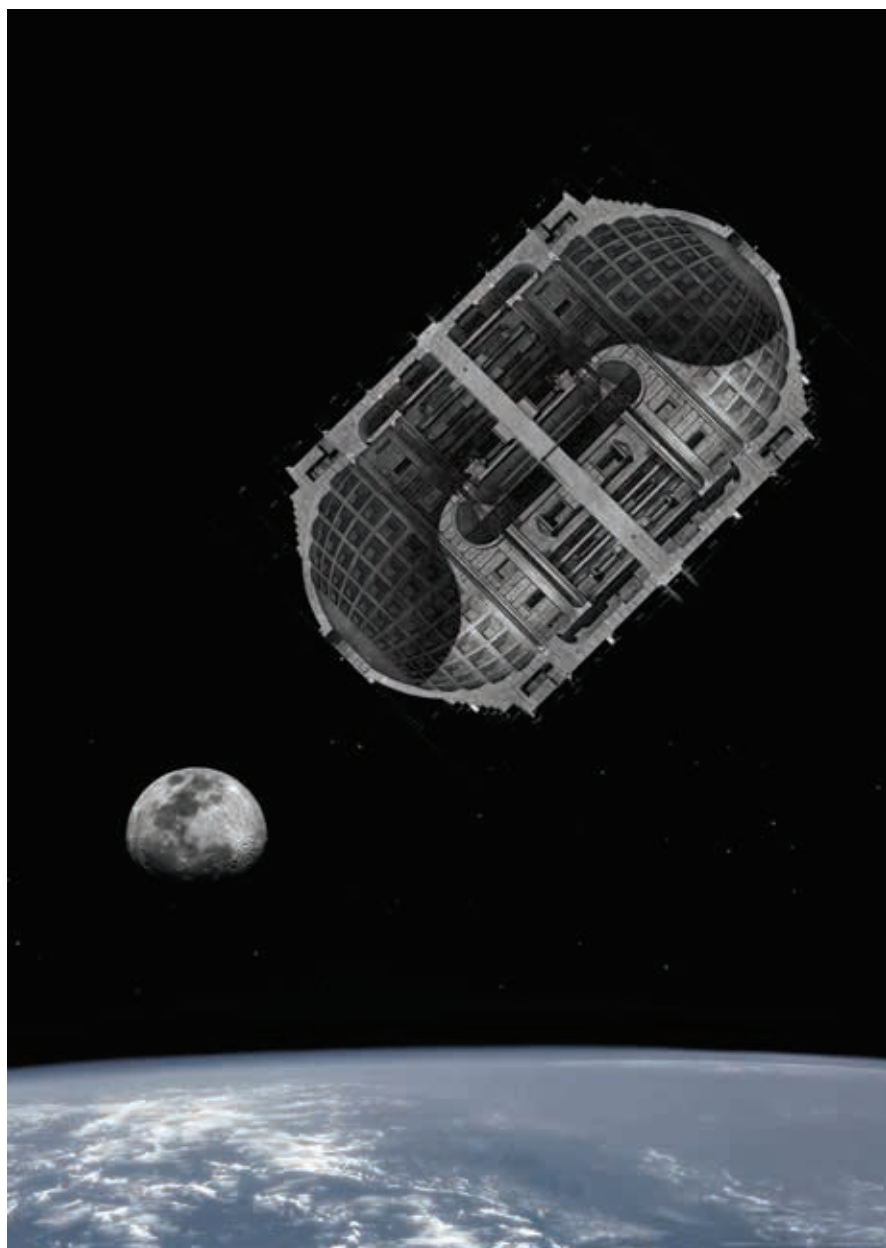
Stazione Spaziale - Ritorni 2010

On the idea of montage as a form of production

by Luca Galofaro

We live in an era in which looking has become the most widespread form of perception. The world seems to be filtered through images of all kinds. Reality almost vanishes, and we are shaped to its collective representation. 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.*(1)*

To know the world, then, and 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 through which we relate to each other.

The images with which we come into contact in every moment of the day are the direct visual project of what we hold inside ourselves, 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 every subject is forced into this continuous confrontation.

The risk at this point is that these images may reduce our perceptive capacities. This is why we need to construct a method of comparison and thought connected with the images themselves.

There can be no result of a cognitive process that does not also and at the same time link back to the very process that generated it. Images are the product of different techniques. Those that interest me are manipulated images, used to produce new meanings, images that have undergone a transformation by means of montage. It is only after this type of appropriation that images take on subjective meaning, and only in this way is it possible to get beyond the objectual character of vision. Only in this way can perception cease to be exclusively a process of an archival order, without any interpretation. Montages can be of different types. They act on the image as object or on a set of images selected and positioned according to an order established by the viewer. Therefore they construct a sequence that is repeated inside my archive. The archive is organized in the form of a blog.

Montage, then, as an ordering principle of the reality that surrounds us. Photography is an image without a code. Though 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. Asking whether photography is analogical or encoded is not a way to find a good criterion for analysis. What is important is that the photograph should have documentary force, and that the documentary character of photography not be based on the object, but on the time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in photography the power of authentication surpasses the power of representation*(2)*.

The realists, of whom I am one and of whom I was already one when I asserted that the photograph was an image without a code – even if, obviously, certain codes do inflect our reading of it – the realists do not take the photograph for a "copy" of reality, but for an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art. To ask whether a photograph is analogical or coded is not a good means of analysis. The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.

Montages

An example of montage to which I often refer is the one theorized first by Aby Warburg*(3)* and then by Georges Didi-Huberman*(4)*, who both transformed the use of images into a tool of research.

Through these two figures I have constructed my analytical and interpretative path through not only the world of art.

Didi-Huberman seems to be primarily interested in the interpretation and use of images, rather than their

ontological status as pure, simple forms of the real. Who looks and how are more important than the object to be observed, in short. This type of montage is done by seeking the material singularity of the visual document, inserting it in the same time inside 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 datum inside a dialectical system) are the two essential poles for looking at the contemporary world.

A discursive practice focused on the presence of the gap, the interruption, on continuous découpage and rémontage, an accumulation of "symptoms" more than of "data," of unexpected motifs, utterly transversal relations reconfigured each time inside a procedure without ever having a solution of closure, the montage seems to be the only critical-visual device to obtain a type of non-standard truth. Working on discontinuities, 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 automatic comment, the stereotype, the immediate and prepackaged term), montage becomes a true form of plunder and renewed raiment of the gaze.

If the image as such, as we read in *Devant le temps(5)* in 2000, is not the imitation of things, but the interval made visible, the fracture line between things, then the gaze too is interval, line of fracture. If the images does not spring from an orderly continuum of causes and effects, but is a dialectical vision composed of past and present

in eternal collision, a sudden shock in which to be able to grasp the lacerating discontinuity of time, then the gaze too, the critical gaze, seems to make shock, "collision," dialectical friction the elements of its vision, the load-bearing members of its very structure.

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

1. Action

In my work montage takes on great importance because it is the operative tool, the medium, through which to interpret the personal archive, constructing the annotations that form an interpretative Atlas of the real.

I see montage as a principle of order, rather than a technique of assembly.

Montage is a principle capable of putting heterogeneous orders of reality into relation with one another, 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 our memory or extracted from reality to be combined and to define images to use as a model for interpretation.

Interpreting a model is what Walter Benjamin, in his essay *On the Mimetic Faculty*, defines as reading what has never been written, before all languages, in the entrails, the stars or dances.

Thus considered, montage is a device capable of organizing images, combining them. Perhaps it would

be clearer to define this logic as an operation of deconstruction of some of the images that define the reality that surrounds us in different temporal zones, a disassembly that conceals inside it the necessity of a reassembly of different times. Also the time (of the image), in fact, takes on a fundamental role in this way of operating. The time of an image has a dual meaning: that of the moment in which it is selected, and that of the moment in which it becomes part of the archive (the exact moment in which it becomes memory) to be projected towards another time, that of the moment in which these annotations take form.

The contrast between temporalities creates a new one that does not belong to the present, but neither to the past. In his *Images in Spite of All* Didi-Huberman*(6)* emphasizes that the knowledge that happens through montage implies that the value of this knowledge cannot be guaranteed by a single image. The images (or fragments of them) thus selected have meaning only if they are juxtaposed with other images.

The comparison and overlapping of images by means of the montage create other images, the annotations, that become part of a personal atlas and reappear in the precise moment in which a new use for them seems to be evident.

Montage grants us the possibility of rejecting the rigidly pre-set form – freedom from routine, giving us the dynamic faculty of assuming any form. Speaking of montage, one cannot help but make reference to S.M. Eisenstein*(7)*. 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 Japanese writing where the meaning springs from the juxtaposition of ideograms combined to produce the meaning.

Two overlaid images, even when of different origin, produce an illusion, a disorientation. Everything comes 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 generates sensations, disorientation, curiosity, but also clearly defines concepts on which to then construct projects, in a second phases.

Eisenstein reaches the point of specifying precisely this: the montage emerges from conflict and collision. The montage is always conflict, conflict between fragments, a style of writing and a method of investigation aimed at clarifying, in his case, the identity of cinema and its position in the universal history of art forms. As in Warburg, Didi-Huberman and Benjamin, it is the encounter with the temporality of the image and of the instruments that convey it that forces history to develop new ways of reconstructing and displaying its formative processes. Montage seen not as a form of artistic composition but as a tool of research to orient ourselves in the chaos of the history of forms.

Premises also found in what Eisenstein himself calls 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, as in the exploration of the productive force of conflict,

of the collision between heterogeneous pieces: montage is not a thought composed of pieces that follow each other in order, but a thought that originates in the collision between two independent pieces.

2. Rules for the construction of an image

Montage is the ordering principle that helps me to construct annotations.

These annotations have to be hospitable, they have to encourage viewing and establish a relationship with the observer. It is important to establish a visual dialogue between the space one wants to represent, the idea that attempts to give it form and the context one tries to construct as the background. An ability to recreate a measurable space, a precise geometric structure, must be demonstrated. Which does not form but structures the space.

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 such a way as 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.

Otherwise, it could be a hybrid place created through grafts of pieces of real buildings, or parts of buildings that have simply been imagined.

Times

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

The image can create, structure and confuse times.

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

Spaces

So it is not so much the image that results from montage that interests me, as the space between the images, which I consider the true space for mental utilization.

This space is the place in which the certainty of what I see runs up against the doubt about what I seem to see or to have glimpsed, if only for an instant. It is from this space that the images should be observed, to manage to assign them a meaning. This device activates spaces of comprehension, creates a physical and mental place, simultaneously visible and invisible.

In my way of operating I try to carry out simple operations, derived from the practice of collage, updated in a dialogue between analog and digital.

Many montages, in fact, are done by hand and then digitally reproduced. In the moment in which they are reproduced a catalogue of fragments is defined, I use it again in time.

But the most important moment is the one that attempts to assign a three-dimensional character to the digital image through printing on overlaid panes of glass.

Thanks to the overlay of the panes, the fragments regain their singularity and determine the necessary passage from loss of meaning to acquisition of new meaning.

In my way of working, I am attracted by certain operations that cha-racterize the form of the collage, but at the same time can be a mode of construction of the architectural project.

The digital images come from the overlaying of planes. The printing on glass maintains this layering and the image loses its iconic value, becoming a device capable of producing variations. Thus the image is never finished and always awaiting something; the meaning changes depending on the side from which it is observed. The machine (the device) does not produce the image but coincides with it, becoming a sort of screen capable of creating a visual system to continuously interpret. The eye of the subject perceives one layer instead of another, making the viewing dynamic.

This device is a fragile system that is not able to rearrange itself in a single thing, because the unity no longer exists, the forms of representation no longer have a single meaning. The layers play on a dialectical level and the meanings emerge in the space that exists between the planes.

In short, for an instant that could last a lifetime, you are faced with an invented, "defigured" image, whose force 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 then its power.

Raymond Bellour in his *L'Entre-Images(8)* aparently explains this path that is not based on the construction of the image but on the reading of the meanings hidden between images, when he says that through the invention of a new image, that in part releases itself in its photographic transparency to make room for other materials, a new physi-

calness is introduced. The work on disassembly and montage is precisely this to manage to create a physicalness of the object-image that, through its defiguration, opens a prefiguration.

The between images is space that is still new enough to be considered an enigma, but already structured enough to be able 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 always conflict, and as such it is a realization in images of dialectic, a dialectic that is always open and never destined to be definitively resolved in a synthesis.

Writing

Up to this point I have concentrated on images, but montage is undoubtedly a form of writing and as such should also be accompanied by writing in the form of words, working on images through the filter of their description, combining the images with the narration that has produced them. Therefore writing too becomes a part of this practice. The images are always juxtaposed with a text, a quotation that accompanies them in the archive and in the moment of their cataloguing, or a text that introduces the series, not in order to explain, but to define a field of action of the image itself.

The incessant pursuit of meaning of recurring forms, that survival (Nachleben) so important to Warburg, which belongs to non-linear history, that that open form of the Mnemosyne Atlas, and to the elliptical space that hosted it.
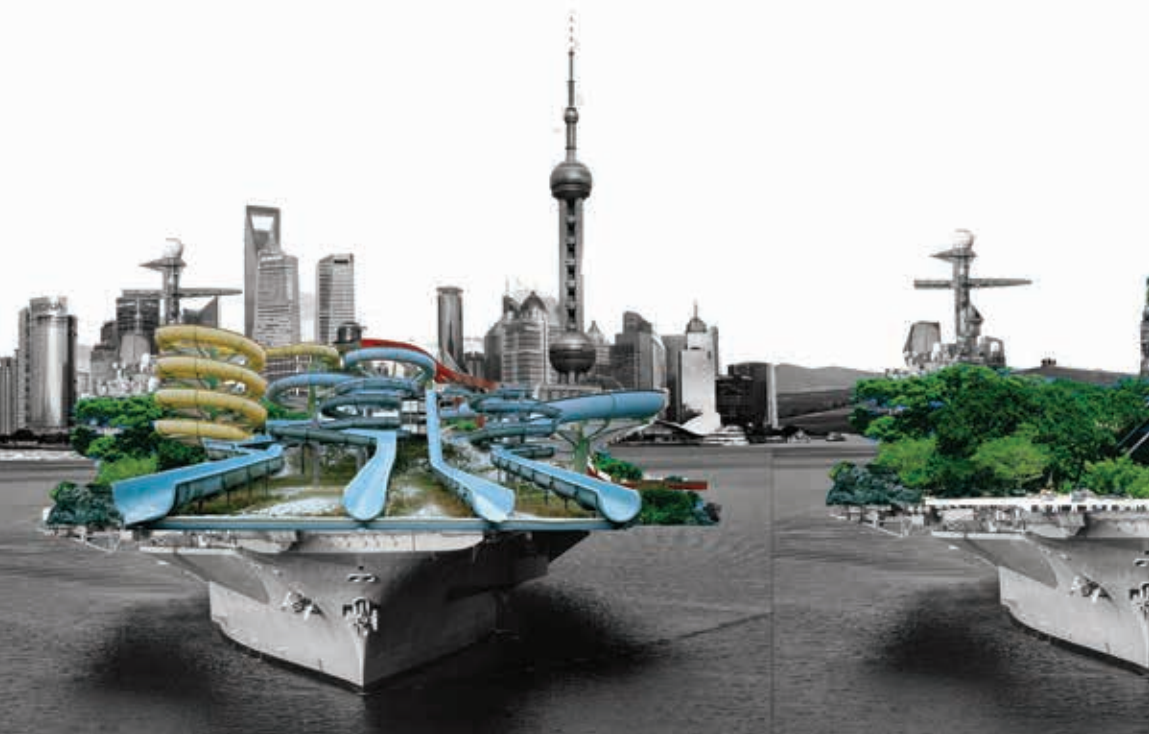
(1) Punto critico : Aprire lo Sguardo. Sull'ermeneutica dell'immagine contemporanea Isabella Mattazzi il manifesto", 8 marzo 2011
(2) Roland Barthes Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (Vintage Classics) Paperback , 1993
(3) L'Atlas Mnémosyne, Aby Warburg Editions Atelier de l'écarquillé Paris 2012
(4) Georges Didi Huberman, Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back? Madrid 2010
(5) Georges Didi Huberman, Devant le temps, Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images Les Editions de Minuit 2000
(6) Georges Didi Huberman Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz Paperback University Of Chicago Press; 1 edition (May 9, 2012)
(7) Sergej M Ejzenstejn; Towards a theory of montage Richard Taylor; Michael Glenny; London : BFI Publishing, 1991.
(8) Raymond Bellour Between-the-Images JRP | Ringler 2012

transaltion from Italian by Steve Piccolo

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