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# Venice Doesn't Exist
## Deconstruction as an Aesthetic Tool on Screen

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Those who fall under the spell of the reflection of their image deceive themselves and become lost. A city like Venice, which constantly coexists with its reflection and reproduction, presents an interesting case study, especially in its relationship with its moving image on the screen. The visual and conceptual deception manifested through the reflection is a recurring theme in contemporary art, where the representation of reality often transforms into an ambiguous game of duplication and loss of authenticity. The reflected image, far from simply reproducing the real, becomes a symbolic device capable of questioning the very nature of identity and perception. Artists from Dan Graham to Michelangelo Pistoletto have used reflective surfaces and reflections to challenge the viewer, forcing them to confront their image and to question the boundary between subject and object, self and other. The reflection is no longer a means of knowing reality but a tool that destabilises visual certainties, amplifying the illusion and fragmentation of subjectivity.[1] This contribution analyses six works of contemporary video art that focus on Venice and its lagoon, deconstructing the city's most perceived reflected image. The aim is to analyse these works using Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction as an aesthetic tool applied to moving images. Here, deconstruction is neither a negation nor a destruction of the image but, rather, a decomposition that allows us to decode the more complex cultural and conceptual components.[2]

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1    Merleau-Ponty Maurice: Phenomenology of Perception. London 2012. p. 236–240.
2    See Brunette Peter/Wills David: Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory. Princeton 1989.

Venice and its double. This question is about not only its reflection but also its identity. As Sara Marini and Alberto Bertagna write in *Venice 2nd Document*, both *Venezia* and Venice exist: a place where people live but also the background of tourists' photographs, a city of residence and the struggle for citizenship but also the world's most replicated souvenir, *Venezia* is the place and Venice is its brand.[3] This duplication generates quite a few idiosyncrasies, not least because *Venezia* and Venice seem to stand in a relationship proportional to that of the object and its reflection: they will never overlap. This is neither a novelty nor a recent phenomenon. Indeed, as early as the 18th century, Venice emerged as one of the first cities to become a visual icon standardised through art, particularly through the 18th-century *vedute* of Canaletto and the 19th-century stereoscopic views of the city. Renowned for its unique architectural and landscape features, Venice was transformed into a fixed, reproducible and internationally recognisable image, anticipating the phenomenon of urban 'branding'.[4] Influenced by foreign collectors and the Grand Tour, Venice became one of the first cities to be systematically immortalised and perceived not merely as a physical location, but also as an idealised visual experience. When examining the moving image in the 20th century, the relationship between Venice and its representation evolves into a *mise-en-abyme* through the lens of cinema. Two primary approaches emerge: filmmakers who utilise Venice as a quintessential backdrop of itself, and those who adopt a more oblique and psychological usage. Among the fictional films most acclaimed globally, one encounters iconic scenes set in the most touristy and beloved locations in the lagoon city. These films include *Summer Madness* (1950) by David Lean, which features Katharine Hepburn, *Death in Venice* (1971) by Luchino Visconti, *Moonraker* (1979) by Lewis Gilbert with Roger Moore as James Bond and *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996) by Woody Allen. These works showcase the idyllic clichés that are marketed and consumed, ranging from St. Mark's Square to the Rialto Bridge, as well as the Hotel des Bains at the Lido and the Gritti Hotel on the Grand Canal. On the other hand, there are films that take a different direction in their relationship with the city, such as Gianfranco de Bosio's *The Terrorist* (1963) with Gian Maria Volonté and Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973) with Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland. Here, Venice becomes less conspicuous and is used not only as a cinematic set but also as a labyrinthine and ghostly psychological dimension, a

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3    Cf. Marini Sara/Bertagna Alberto: Venice 2nd Document. Venice 2017.
4    Cf. Bettel Hans: Canaletto and the Art of Venice. Yale 2003.

mirror of the protagonists' minds, as in Roeg's film. However, the Venice inhabited by its residents often diverges significantly from these cinematic portrayals. So, how has the representation of Venice and its lagoon on screen evolved in contemporary times? And in what ways have contemporary artistic media influenced new approaches to portraying a city that has increasingly become a symbol of the Anthropocene?[5]

The first example analysed in this reflection, *Atlantide* (104', 2021) by Yuri Ancarani (Fig. 1), straddles the boundary between film and video art. The feature film, which was presented in competition at the 78th Venice International Film Festival, is a hybrid fiction that navigates the submerged aspects of the city by following the lives of adolescents from the island of Sant'Erasmo. Their experiences blend bucolic moments – like diving into the lagoon from vaporetto stops and doing wheelies on bicycles – with reckless, dangerous races between their small but furiously fast motorboats. This side of Venice is largely hidden from outsiders and often overlooked by the city itself. Their Venice is far away from the city's historic centre and famous landmarks. Much like the islands of Sant'Erasmo and Pellestrina, adolescence in Venice is marginalised and little attention is paid to these outlying communities. Ancarani's film deconstructs the familiar image of Venice, exposing a reality that is less visible to mainstream audiences but nonetheless present: the reality of the lives of young Venetians and of how they navigate their formative years. Over four years, Ancarani followed this group of teenagers, who appear in the film as non-professional actors playing themselves. The dialogue is taken directly from their real lives, and the screenplay evolved alongside the film's production, challenging traditional approaches to filmmaking. In this way, *Atlantide* captures a unique perspective on Venice and its lagoon, highlighting the city's ecological transformation from the often-overlooked viewpoint of its youth.

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5   'Thus, whatever happens in Venice requires a special scrutiny as both an indication and a laboratory of what fate has in store for the cities of the future.' Salvatore Settis: If Venice Dies. New York 2016. p. 170.

*Fig. 1: Yuri Ancarani, Atlantide, 2021. Still from video (104').*



Courtesy of *Studio Ancarani*

In the field of video art, Antoni Muntadas's work, *In Girum Revisited…* (14' 32", 2017) (Fig. 2), engages with and recontextualises in a contemporary way the psychogeographical drift of Guy Debord's film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978).[6] In *In Girum Revisited…*, Muntadas presents a series of extended sequences of Venice, viewed from its canals and captured by a camera placed on a boat that moves through the water. The title itself is also a reference to Debord's film, which was his final cinematic work.[7]

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6    Guy Debord, one of the founders of the Situationist International, developed the concept of psychogeography to describe the effect of the geographical environment on the psychology of individuals. In his short text of 1957, Psychogeographical Venice, Debord proposes Venice as the first subject for a psychogeographical exploration, describing it as a city impossible to map, a true labyrinth that eludes rational understanding. Debord Guy: Psychogeographical Venice, 1957. In: Knabb Ken (ed.). Complete Cinematic Works. Baltimore 2003.

7    The Latin phrase 'In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni' is an ancient palindrome meaning 'We go around in the night and are consumed by fire', which evokes the fleeting brilliance of fireflies and symbolises a view of history in which revolutions are momentary bursts of intensity that eventually burn themselves out. Debord Guy: In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni. 1978.

*Fig. 2: Antoni Muntadas, In Girum Revisited…, 2017. Still from video (14' 32").*



Courtesy of the artist

As with several of Debord's films, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* incorporated found footage, including scenes shot in Venice, which were interwoven with other cinematic fragments. These Venetian sequences intermittently appear throughout the film, conveying both movement and a spatial relationship with the city that frames the entire narrative as a visual *dérive*. Muntadas re-edits and brings together Debord's Venetian sequences to create a continuous movement through the city. The original 1978 footage is presented alongside contemporary images of Venice, which appear in a small window on the screen, blending past and present. Like Debord, Muntadas maintains the disconnection between the spoken commentary and the images, creating a layer of separation that was integral to Debord's original. In 2015, inspired by Debord's fascination with Venice, Muntadas created *Derive Veneziane*, a film that captures a nocturnal boat journey through the city, exploring themes of darkness, solitude, discovery and the phantasmagorical qualities of Venice as experienced through drifting. Venice, as the first city selected by Debord for psychogeographical analysis, serves as the perfect setting for this continued exploration; Venice, as the symbol of the impermanence of things, including nature, humans and utopias. Muntadas's gazes retrace those of Guy Debord but the lagoon landscape has changed, and psychogeographical drifts also meet the challenges of climate change. In fact, *In Girum Revisited…*

also documents the bulky traces of the Anthropocene that are not present in Debord's drifts. At the entrance to the Arsenal dock, Muntadas captures the yellow architecture of *M.O.S.E. (Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico)*, a system of mobile barriers designed to safeguard Venice from the increasing threat of rising sea levels and tidal surges.

In 2015, the videomaker Matteo Stocco initiated *Metagoon,* an online platform organised as an archive of micro reports and interviews with individuals working in the Venetian Lagoon. This project, whose name suggests a lagoon that 'goes beyond' traditional geography and accessible knowledge, serves as a tool for investigating the lagoon's ecosystem. It disseminates information about the environment as experienced by those who work closely with the waters: harbourmasters, fishermen and laboratory chemists. Notably, *Metagoon* deliberately maintains a distance from the city of Venice itself, orbiting around it and describing its operations without ever explicitly naming or framing the city. Instead, the project reveals the 'traces' of Venice through the experiences of its labourers, offering an indirect portrayal. On the *Metagoon* online platform, oral histories are interwoven with landscape footage of the areas where the interviews were conducted. This knowledge archive, available in both Italian and English, has also taken the form of a performative medium-length film titled *Metagoon 24h* (2024), which is edited in various ways and lengths depending on the context in which it is presented. In collaboration with Matteo Primiterra and the band *Macedonia Sintetica* (Simone Carraro, Carlo Camerin, Mattia Rigon), Stocco re-edited materials from the online archive, juxtaposing images of the lagoon's landscapes and activities over the course of 24 hours, from dawn to dusk, culminating in night-time aerial footage over Porto Marghera. The slow pace of working life in the lagoon, with its expanded rhythms and gestures, combined with the techno-jazz compositions of *Macedonia Sintetica*, becomes a reflection of the frenetic interchanges between human, animal and ecological life that characterise Venice's unique environment.

*Fig. 3: Sonia Levy, We Marry You, O Sea, as a Sign of True and Perpetual Dominion, 2023. Still from video (18' 12").*



Courtesy of the artist, and of the *Giacomelli Fund, Municipality of Venice Photographic Archive*

If traditional historical narratives have always started from the surface of the water, Sonia Levy looked at the complex and changing nature of Venice through underwater cinematography. *We Marry You, O Sea, as a Sign of True and Perpetual Dominion* (18' 12", 2023) (Figs. 3–4) is a two-channel video installation that turns the city's history upside down by narrating its submerged biomorphic processes, the fractures in its environment, highlighting a new materiality of Venice. But Levy's work also speaks volumes about the domination of man, and industry, over the ecosystem. The title refers to the *Marriage of the Sea*, a Venetian tradition that took place every year on Ascension Day between the 11th and 18th centuries. The Doge, the patriarch of Venice, would throw a wedding ring into the water from a boat as a symbol of the eternal union between the Republic's highest political figure and the waters of its territory. The marriage union, however, is understood as matrimonial domination, with the patriarch controlling the sea for good.[8] Levy's work thus questions the anthropogenic effects on the lagoon but, more importantly, highlights the roles of domination, historical and political, over water. Like Muntadas's work, Levy's is also grafted onto archival documents. Stories of the modernisation of life in the lagoon flow across the screen, interweaving

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8    Cf. Lane Frederic Chapin: Venice: A Maritime Republic. Baltimore 1973.

documents that come from the Giacomelli Photographic Archive in Venice. Photographs of early 20th-century railway infrastructure, the architecture of the petrochemical plant in Marghera and structures in the port area are interwoven with microscopic visions of the delicate lagoon morphology, with its constant struggles and existential tensions. The sonorous and conflicting relationship between the human and aquatic dimensions is also expressed in the soundtrack: a mixture of human choirs and underwater sound recordings.

*Fig. 4: Sonia Levy, We Marry You, O Sea, as a Sign of True and Perpetual Dominion, 2023. Still from video (18' 12"). Commissioned by TBA21-Academy with the support of the S+t+ARTS initiative of the European Commission and the European Marine Board 'EMBracing the Ocean' programme.*



Courtesy of the artist

The underwater world and underwater cinematography are also taken up by Andrea De Fusco in a video essay entitled *Per un'estetica dell'Apocalisse* (*Aesthetics of the Apocalypse*, 9' 22", 2022) (Fig. 5). In this work, Venice's image is deconstructed by being shown from below water level, which makes it almost unrecognisable, while also associating it with deeper symbolic deconstruction. Narrated by Gianni Garrera, philologist and translator of the *Book of Revelation*,[9] the short film intertwines footage of diverse destructive events: the 2019 Notre Dame fire, Venice's exceptional high water in November 2019 and eruptions of lava from Stromboli in the Aeolian Islands. These images suggest the possibility of impending natural disasters – rising sea levels, urban fires and volcanic eruptions – creating an apocalyptic vision of nature's fury. The imagery and footage are intentionally decelerated to evoke a sense of extended temporality, while simultaneously accentuating the aestheticisation of catastrophe and its intricate details. This technique not only underscores the severity of the depicted events but also encourages viewers to engage thoughtfully with the complexities of destruction, transforming the horrific into a contemplative visual experience. Through Garrera's narration, De Fusco's work reflects the Christian concept of the Apocalypse, drawing on Hegel's idea of a fundamental conflict between humanity, civilisation and nature. However, within modern ecological discourse, this principle of conflict is absent. Instead, the moment of the world's end represents the ultimate expression of divine supremacy over nature, with the *Revelation* serving as the highest manifestation of divine creation.[10] De Fusco's work engages with the imagery of Venice through an additional layer of symbolic identity: the persistent fear of its destruction. Venice is not merely the city built on water; it is also the city that constantly risks sinking into it. This duality highlights the tension between Venice's iconic status and the looming threat of environmental degradation, underscoring the fragility of its existence in an ever-changing ecological landscape.

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9      Garrera Gianni (ed.): Apocalisse di Giovanni con un saggio sulla musica della fine del mondo «super apocalypsim musica». Diabasis 2005.

10     Cf. Garrera Gianni. In: Sertoli Giuseppe (ed.). Della grammatologia. Milan 2013.

*Fig. 5: Andrea De Fusco, Per un'estetica dell'Apocalisse (Aesthetics of the Apocalypse), 2022. Still from video (9' 22").*



Courtesy of the artist

*Fig. 6: Sara Tirelli, VR Pavilion, 2019.*



Photo: Cecilia Tirelli. Courtesy of the artist

*VR Pavilion* by the artist Sara Tirelli (Fig. 6), which was commissioned by the *Nordic Art Association (NKF)* under the curation of Jonatan Habib Engqvist, emerges as a significant case study in contemporary video art, particularly due to the way it engaged with the Venetian Lagoon while expanding the medium of virtual reality. The immersive installation exemplifies the transformative potential of virtual reality as an artistic form, while interrogating and subverting traditional perceptions of the Venetian landscape. In doing so, it serves as a compelling framework for examining the disconnection of iconic imagery from its established narratives. Positioned on a functioning barge departing from the historic headquarters of the ex-Communist Party in Venice, *VR Pavilion* presents a distinctive platform for engaging with Tirelli's work *Medusa* (2019). Participants don Oculus Rift headsets, immersing themselves in a stark, anonymous white cube gallery space where the narrative unfolds. The experience begins with soundbites relaying news and regulations regarding unaccompanied underage migrants arriving in Sweden, situating viewers within contemporary social issues that extend far beyond the picturesque veneer of Venice. As the experience progresses, participants observe unidentified male youths clad in baggy sportswear ascending a steep ladder to an isolated platform. This striking visual invites immediate emotional engagement, as each youth approaches the viewer, eliciting visceral reactions that oscillate between discomfort and empathy. This interaction underscores the human narratives often overshadowed by romanticised depictions of Venice. Then the viewpoint shifts to hover above a group of white individuals in uniform T-shirts, who echo the pose of the survivors depicted in Théodore Géricault's iconic painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19). This deliberate allusion deconstructs visual narratives surrounding Venice and provokes critical reflections on historical and contemporary issues, including migration and identity. By juxtaposing these two groups, Tirelli illuminates the dissonance between the idealised imagery of the Venetian landscape and the pressing realities faced by marginalised communities. *VR Pavilion* deconstructs the romanticised experience of being transported by boat through the fetishised city of history and beauty. Instead it opens a window onto the struggles of those who have faced – and continue to face – the traumas of migration and survival by sea, creating a powerful and unsettling disruption that also interrogates European memory and identity. The fluidity of virtual reality allows for a manipulation of time and space, enabling narratives to shift between past, present and future. In this way, Venice vanishes into its most iconic image, serving as the perceptual backdrop for an immersive experience that encompasses drift, shipwreck,

sense of loss, the disintegration of identity and a sense of alienation, all at the same time.

In *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* Derrida writes that 'to deconstruct is to take apart a system that operates invisibly; it means to reveal that what we consider natural is constructed by structures that are not fixed, but fluid'.[11] This is precisely the approach reflected in the works analysed here: a more or less deliberate process of deconstructing Venice's identity, revealing new perspectives and less visible, constantly shifting realities. Venice's identity appears fragmented and in flux, as in Matteo Stocco's web archive and film, or in Sonia Levy's installation that offers an underwater perspective on the city's materiality. Antoni Muntadas revisits the *dérives* of Guy Debord, highlighting analogies and changes in the city from 1978 to today, while Andrea De Fusco immerses the observer in a visual essay that explores a hidden yet ever-present feature of Venice: its potential disappearance.

Yuri Ancarani's *Atlantide* portrays the 'drifting youth' of Sant'Erasmo and Pellestrina, a vibrant yet often marginalised microcosm. Sara Tirelli's virtual reality work deconstructs the visual representation of Venice, leaving it as a sensory point of reference or experience in a project that addresses a sense of European identity in decline and a feeling of expanding alienation. Venice no longer exists as a singular, recognisable representation; Venice is not the timeless entity that has been depicted for centuries, 'it is a stratification of cultural and natural information'.[12] And these hybrid works, straddling the boundaries between art installations, video art and cinema, pave the way for new modes of representing the identity of an ever-changing ecosystem, a thinking machine in the era of the Anthropocene.[13]

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11    Derrida Jacques: Writing and Difference. Chicago 1978. p. 278.

12    Baldacci Cristina: Acque and Mud: Stratification as a Metaphor of Time (Maria Morganti). In: Baldacci, Cristina/Bassi Shaul/De Capitani Lucio/Omodeo Pietro (eds.): Venice and the Anthropocene. An Ecocritical Guide. Venice 2022. p. 55.

13    Iovino Serenella: Foreword. In: Baldacci, Cristina et al. (eds.): Venice and the Anthropocene. An Ecocritical Guide. Venice 2022. p. 6.