

FALSA IMAGINE: scale, stage, loop

by Rachel Bennett

Politics and conflict crashed into this place. Through the screen we are aerial, slow pan over injured buildings that avow 'something happened here'. But, AI-generated, the images in Ivan Šuletić's *FALSA IMAGINE* (2023) are a nowhere that never was.

Ours is a society of consumption, where public obsession is stoked equally by urban warfare or celebrity gossip. Šuletić's *FALSA IMAGINE* is a film of conflict, flirting with an impulse to trace power dynamics in event analysis. Over the AI-generated ruins, the subtitles are instantly recognisable from a viral celebrity trial, connecting the images to 'here' (May 2023, a courtroom in Utah, where trivialities of a ski accident involving Gwyneth Paltrow were aggrandised into a feverish online investigation). 'Then' arrives with a cello score from *Falsa Imagine*, an aria in Handel's *Ottone* (an opera set in a 10th-century Byzantine court, first staged in 1771). Together, the whole plays across time frames and speeds. Everything changes, but human nature remains constant in its desire for intrigue.

Recognition works on two levels: 'ruins' and 'conflict' are loaded as prompts into the AI machine, producing an instant of image generation; a proliferation of non-places sometime during or after a war. In contrast, the legalese of the celebrity litigation is specific and instantly recognisable – the shared artefact of forensic pop culture analysis. A society of opinionators – give us performance, placeholder or approximation – we are devoted spectators and will change ourselves through participation.

scale

Sometime in the second half of the twentieth century, we lost ground. Gilles Deleuze observed the 'old realism of places' becoming unmoored.¹ Similar affects were noted by Fredric Jameson as globalisation fomented a discontinuous, incoherent sense of space. This is as much a problem of geography as it is representation – at the same time as the world becomes dizzyingly 'global' it fragments conceptually. The spatial logics of late capitalism include a proliferating terrain of images and signs, illegible regimes of montage and concurrency. But the problems of representation can be met with new models. Deleuze's observations on the cinematic image are useful to understand this fractured world. Constrained to the frame, the image becomes structured by and gestures beyond to void spaces without coordinates or context,² pure *espaces quelconque* or any-space-whatever. Disconnected from grounded objects and meanings, we can use them as models to encounter a world of badly tessellated, competing images. For orientation in this image-scape, Jameson too sought alternative aesthetics for world cognition, suggesting a cognitive map was required – meaning new media literacies and mobile conceptual geographies.³

Perspective constructs a relation between observer and observed; between looking at the image and the world, a subject is diagrammed. In his practice, Šuletić uses drawing, painting and sculpture to engage tactics and strategies of representation in order to contest the image as a stable surface to be observed, or coherent text to be read. In production, content and circulation, the image is an operation that forms – and masks – real social or individual conditions.⁴ Hijacking conventions of perception established in the long history of landscape art, his processes animate organisations of self and space and destabilise the habits of the image – both looking, making and circulating – to show the mechanisms at play. Elements gleaned from digital images are magnified, mimicked and replicated through his paintings, sculptures and drawings,

1 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), p.126.

2 See Gilles Deleuze, 'The Components of the Image', in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), pp.225–40.

3 Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1988), pp.347–56, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19059-1>.

4 See Ivan Šuletić, 'Cityscapes of Non-Places', *SAJ – Serbian Architectural Journal*, vol.12, no.2 (2020), pp.66–84, <https://doi.org/10.5937/saj2002066Q> and Ana Bogdanović, 'About Landscape and Hiding in the Works of Ivan Šuletić', in Ivan Šuletić, exhibition catalogue (Gallery RIMA, Kragujevac, 2017).

producing surfaces of infinite repetition. The ordinary apparatus of representation – legible signs or structures of perception – are glitched into screens that outdistance the thing itself.

In *FALSA IMAGINE* and recent paintings, Šuletić has used AI-generated images as sources, further exacerbating the break between material and virtual realities. The film's slow pan across ruins is a way of looking that becomes haptic. Despite this visceral texture, there is no privileged point of view or specificity of place to gain orientation. More than machinic, this abstraction resists legibility. The same happens with his paintings and drawings, where the image is exposed as a relational construct, dependent on vantage, taking shape through moments of encounter, looking and sharing. The introduction of the screen removes an element of control felt in looking. The schism is not between the thing and its representation, the eye and its movement, or the hand and the machine, but between what can be represented and what is elided in the act of making and viewing.

stage

Mediated like the image, truths and identities are produced through relational dynamics, taking form as ideology in the negative space between people and positions. Ideology is paradoxical – it obscures as it structures. Actual, material conditions are hidden while hierarchical positions of power and dominance are animated.

These interactions occur in both tangible and abstract (conceptual) spaces. Louis Althusser's paradigmatic territory of subject formation is the street – emblematic of public space as a constellation of ideas, meanings and assumptions which form the ideological framework we, unconsciously, exist within. The ritual goes like this: a police officer calls out 'Hey, you there!' A person responds with a movement. In the motion of turning 180 degrees, they are brought into being as a subject (in Althusserian language, this 'hailing' and 'turn' is interpellation).⁵ But the police officer stands in for the state apparatus of force and coercion and the street is a metaphor for the terrain of ideology – our 'imaginary relationship' to our 'real conditions of existence'.⁶ We are subjects concretely constituted by such performative acts; ideology and identity collide, and we are recruited into social orders to which we have little direct access.

Today we can think of images as infrastructures that mediate power and identity, arranging them into social structures as representations for relation and consumption. Šuletić explores the territory of the image as such a process – from the image as landscape and the landscape as image. In the conversion of thing to image, from digital artefact to painting, drawing and back again, the representational logics are displaced and disrupted. When the subtitles of *FALSA IMAGINE* ask 'does the animation fairly represent your story?', the film not only presents courtroom discourse, but also questions our own imaginary relation to what an image (re)presents and conceals.

Today, images articulate meanings between contexts – 'articulate' as in speech, but also joint or lever – integral, active parts in networks of ideas. In war, as in celebrity scandal, they proliferate. Historically, they have taken a broadcast mechanism to elicit sympathy or condemnation, or to be enfolded into histories – of archives or pop culture magazines. When we take up the representational bricolage of the world – from scandal to geopolitics – we enter remote ideological terrains that afford a subjective anonymity. The screen is more than just a cover for offline identities; images present placeholders and templates that invoke a potent, emboldened self-interpellation. It is as if the 'hey, you there' is spoken not to us, but by us, to an image or a situation apart from our lived realities, through which identities of a global order are framed. Whether it is a harrowing image or a quotable celebrity scandal, these representations provide a 'ready-made' subject position that we embrace and adopt to perform spectatorship beyond watching, a rabid looking driven by lurid analysis. The image – invoked, shared, commented upon – is not only a part of the apparatus framing ideology; it becomes self-reflexive, a willingly adopted accessory through which we articulate a self.

loop

⁵ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, Modern Reader, PB-213 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p.174.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.162.

To perform versions of 'truths' (that is, of 'ideology') is an act of time travel. There is the event and there is the documentation, its spread and analysis. Materials relay and circulate, with each 'take' eclipsing what came before. To represent a thing or a time, to speak of what happened, is to self-hail into ever-more extreme positions that, with each turn, become further from the event itself.

The set for this discourse might be a courtroom, a reel or a newsroom. During 2023's celebrity trial, Paltrow is asked 'who hit who?' – a question of equipoise that sets up a binary: the collision was an event, two bodies come together and from then on perspectives will be split.

Who hit who? We hit the screen – the limit of witnessing. Zoom in and the images disintegrate into noise. Next up is the interleaving of takes: for, against, refutation, community note, debunked, mistranslated. Virtual witnessing drives analysis, analysis moves away from the kernel of the real. Politics and conflict crash in the image, and we are set on ever more erratic orbits – away from the event and into divergent, careening elliptic 'truths'.

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