Editorial

"IMMAGINI?" as an Interdisciplinary Proposal †

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Abstract: In this introduction essay—extended version of the Conference Opening Address—we will explain the reasons for which the conference was organized, examine some of the cultural assumptions underlying the conference, and briefly introduce some of the topics dealt with by the speakers and the contributions.

Keywords: visual studies; visual science; image; imagination; representation; interdisciplinary

1. Why IMMAGINI?

Why does an international conference maintain the title exclusively in Italian while the subtitle is bilingual? The reason lies in the role of a question mark—so central in the selected, symmetrically doubled, logo of the conference. Clearly, it is a double meaning. The first is a play on words that indissolubly links the word "images" to the word "imagination". It originates from the question mark, which extends the semantic amplitude of "images" to the question "Are you imagining?", or to the exhortation "Can you imagine?". The second meaning is an attitude shared by the conference promoters and the organizers, that is the attitude of those who are convinced that knowledge is a heritage in the making and always open, which is primarily built by formulating questions to overcome boundaries and borders.

There are several reasons why a group of researchers from very different disciplinary fields met and decided to organize an international conference. The first is the feeling that on some issues the disciplinary tools, whatever they are, on certain occasions are not adequate for a thorough investigation. The second is that the only answer to this feeling is interdisciplinary dialogue. The third is that one of the themes that could fuel this process is the study of the relationship between image and imagination.

The images and their multiple imaginative power provide a theme that is particularly suited to the study of researchers from different disciplines and the reasons are all too evident. Images, whether they are instruments of communication or visual space of signification, bring to light a set of elements and dynamics that engage the observer from a cognitive point of view in multiple ways. Furthermore, the points of view from which we observe them must be manifold.

As Georges Didi-Huberman states in his *Devant l'image. Questions posées aux fin d'une histoire de l'art* [1], to approach images, it is necessary to place a space between our antecedent knowledge, categorized and characterized by different knowledge, and the moment in which the gaze (our gaze is the result of our experiences) is posed on the image. Didi-Huberman summarizes this moment of knowledge in a recent interview:

"The appearance of an image, regardless of its 'power' and its effectiveness, 'invests' us and then undermines us. […] being in front of the image means at the same time putting back into question to put it back into play. We must not be afraid of not knowing more (in the moment in which the image undresses us of our certainties), or of knowing more (in the moment in which we have to understand

the same construction, to understand it in something larger that concerns the dimension anthropological, historical or political images)" [2] (p. 56).

The intangible substance of the image is the optimal infrastructure for the imagination, intended as the construction of images-synthesis of *eidos* and *eidolon* [3] and not as "putting into image" according to the typical English linguistic meaning. The process of perception that makes the signifying portrayal of the image tangible is underlined by the substantial equivalence—that is to say equating value—of the act of seeing and of the act of imagining proposed by Merleau-Ponty [4], detaching itself from the Cartesian statute of distinction between Knowledge and the World, and partly by clarifying the detachment also from the substantially negative view of Satre's imaginary.

The historical categories of iconography and iconology, implemented with semiotics and philosophy as proposed above, but also hermeneutics and phenomenology, do not seem to be entirely sufficient to understand the contemporary image, which seems to require a necessarily polyhedric approach.

The image in the 21st century is digital, pervasive, and rapid. It is an image filtered by mobile devices, both incoming and outgoing, which is produced, consumed instantly and delivered first to anyone (even unsuspecting or unintended recipients) and then to a stationary oblivion, relegated to a condition of unattainability (the temporal proximity relationship now broken) in which it is however impossible to completely erase its traces.

The image in the 21st century is a space. It is a visual space, formed by known dimensions but whose depth is yet to be discovered, in which we act and build relationships through imagination.

The image in the 21st century is immersive, in a constant balance between the three-dimensionality of fruition and the two-dimensionality of the section of a projection.

The image in the 21st century is still the preferred vehicle for the development of imagination and conception, for the typical conformation of figurative creativities (architecture, painting, comics, graphic design, data visualization, etc.).

The image in the 21st century, today, is an experience of a visual artifact that produces a look that leads to imagination.
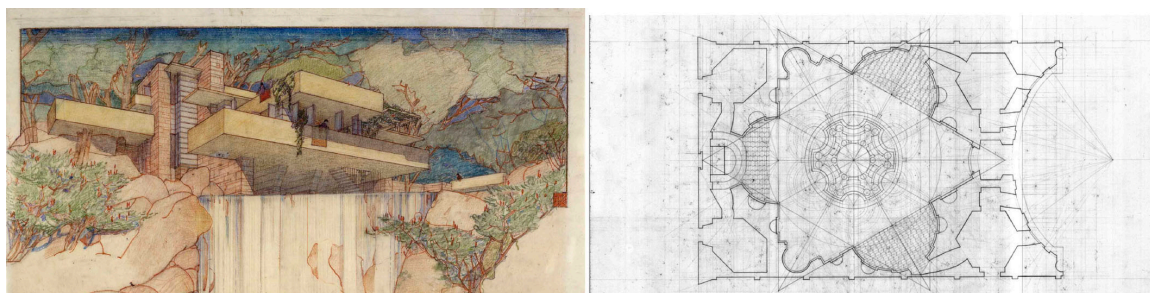

Figure 1. Images that embody the imagination of their author (project design) and images that attempt to trace back their original intentions (survey drawing).

2. Cultural Assumptions

However, the architecture of the relationship between image and imagination can be profoundly changeable, because changeable—often ambiguous—is the nature of the image. Then, there are images that embody the imagination of their author (project design) and images that attempt to trace back their original intentions (survey drawing) (Figure 1); images deeply rooted in a real space (geographic maps and images of cities) and images that act in a space necessarily imagined (virtual and augmented reality, utopian cities or Piranesian spaces) (Figure 2); images that intentionally alter the perceived reality (photographic manipulations) and images that derive from the deception or alteration of the perceptive patterns (anamorphic representations and disparitory phenomena) (Figure 3); images that build narrative paths (visual storytelling) and educational images, capable of forming knowledge and know-how (didactic iconography and iconology) (Figure 4); images that enhance the narrative experience of the child (illustration for children) and experiential images in

which they find synthesis of time and space (childish drawing) (Figure 5); images that stimulate the imagination of their user (visual design) and interactive images that support the imagination of the planner (processing and visualization of data on a territorial scale) (Figure 6). So Aesthetics, Architecture, Visual Communication, Education, Psychology, but also all those disciplines that, from the signification of images, draw substantial possibilities for their development, are found in this common research space where different methodologies and epistemologies complement each other. Yet it is believed that a good part of the scientific community shares the field of study in which many of the approaches introduced up to now—and many others—converge, i.e., the field of *Visual Studies*. First of all, this is because in *Visual Studies* we tend to place at the center of the analysis every kind of image that is an integral part of a cultural process that extends far beyond the field of art [5] but also because we consider images as cultural artifacts that focus on the origin of the images themselves, the original condition in which they were produced, the intentions of their author, and the meanings and contents that have been recognized by those who have placed themselves before those images [6] (p. 38). Therefore, it is useful to understand some genealogical lines that led to the formation of this contemporary discipline.

Figure 2. Images deeply rooted in a real space (geographic maps and images of cities) and images in a necessarily imagined space (virtual and augmented reality, utopian cities or Piranesian spaces).

3. Visual Trans-Culture

Conceiving an image as part of a visual culture, thus strongly influenced by history, leads to understanding its relationship with the devices and with the methods of reading made available by time and by society.

Pinotti and Somaini place the origins of visual culture in the work of the critic Béla Balász and the artist Lázló Moholy-Nagy; in their reflections, based on the expressions of *visual culture*, *optical culture* and *culture of vision*, it is possible to trace back the investigation conducted on the influence of photographic and cinematographic means, determining a profound change in the image acquisition process and intervening in the recognition of the sign and the interpretation of form in the process of vision. The process of dynamic restitution of moving images through the *machine* that, according to director Jean Epstein [7], reconsiders reality according to its technical possibilities, its own *intelligence*, intervenes in imagination and memory.

However, it is in the invention of the press that Béla Balázs places the beginning of the process of transformation from what he calls the *visible spirit* [6] (p. 4) to the *readable spirit*, that passage from the image to the word that the cinematographic technique has then reacquired with the production and diffusion at the great scale of the image in the visual dimension.

In the philosophical sphere, the passage made by Aristotle from the mythos to the logos establishes a new relationship between the imaginative work and the word [8] (p. 241). Precisely because of its analytical power, it makes it possible to distinguish and name concepts that are inserted in the imaginal dimension and take on an irrational construction of form. Even the Platonic meditation on the soul–image perimetration leads Aristotle himself to affirm that «in thinking we give the same phenomenon as in drawing a figure» [9] (p. 239). A relationship between physical reality and phenomenal appearance transliterated from the gestaltic school in relation to the perceptual phenomena that govern the structuring of the form, or from the representational modes of the semiotic icon/index/symbol tripartition which links the model and

object in a relationship of inevitable conceptual and textural references. The evolution of these reasonings moves around the notion of *depiction*, representation through images of another thing, conducted by Ernst Gombrich, who recognizes a fundamental illusionist effect in the process of representation through which the image of an object will give the illusory feeling of perceiving the object itself. Moreover, also in the context of the neurosciences, Freedberg and Gallese, identifying a close relationship between the formation of the images and the somatopsychic responses of the observer, hypothesize that in the observer–image connection a mechanism similar to that of mirror neurons is activated, advanced by Giacomo Rizzolatti since the second half of the nineties (in whose research group was Gallese).

On the culture of vision, László Moholy-Nagy, around the 1920s, introduced the theme of light through which to configure the matter of objects in space, giving life to new cultures and new forms; the Hungarian artist relied on the influence that cinema and photography could have in the cultural transformation of vision associated with human experience. Thus, the superimposition of several images, curved screens and projections of light, would have led to the codification of a form of visual education for which human perceptions would also have been modified by technological means.

What for Moholy-Nagy represented the light from the artistic point of view in the act of vision, for Jean Epstein was instead constituted by cinema, by the machine in action that intervened in the recording of the movement and the consequent restitution of dynamic images, profoundly changing the perception of reality evolving over time.

The characteristic of fluidity and variability of the image-space over time, through the cinematographic device, defined a further formal syntax, that of visual emotions; in fact, Eipstein referred to a visual thought, «a quick, concrete, plastic knowledge that is acquired directly through the eyes» [6] (p. 11).

The concept of image linked to the visual culture of movement, the evolution of form and dimension is also found in the studies of Serge Daney and Raymond Bellour on the body dimension of visualization that brings together cinemas and visual arts in the production of moving images. In this immediacy of reading, which comes from the image, the visual culture, derived from the explicit communication of the visual in movement, represents the man in his gestural expressiveness, through a vocabulary of parts in plastic evolution that do not require verbal languages, but which become latent in a universal communication.

Scholars of cinematographic theories have stressed the importance of identifying all those forces and tensions that structure the image in motion, determining its diversified and complex configurations, as claimed by theorists such as Jacques Aumont or Luc Vancheri who distinguish the level of *figuration*, in which the images narrate, with that of the *figurabilité*, which constitutes the phase of real dynamic evolution [6] (p. 57).
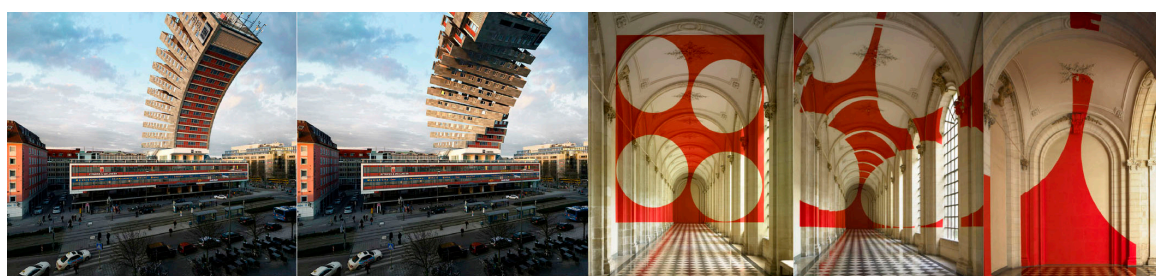

Figure 3. Images that intentionally alter the perceived reality (photographic manipulations) and images that derive from the deception or alteration of the perceptive patterns (anamorphic representations and disparitory phenomena).

4. Images, Imagination and Mind

From an initial survey on the role of images in psychology, it is evident how the school of Wundt, considered as parts constituting the consciousness, will become the immaterial and illusory aspect of thought, reaching a phase in which the activity of thinking will be conceived in the absence of images. In the early twentieth century, in response to the school in Würzburg, Binet put forward his theories regarding the need to represent words and images to implement the transition from unconscious to conscious thinking. Only since the 1960s, with the emergence of cognitivism in dispute with behaviorism, through the channel of representation, would the mental image that, according to Piaget, will mark the phase of experimental psychology, be legitimized. He identified in the image a trace of perception and at the same time its central role in the formation of thought, starting, from the twentieth century, the divergence between image and thought and the subsequent convergence between image and memory. Consistent with these reflections, Piaget recognizes the importance of the role assumed by the symbolic image and "records three important results: the image is not a prolongation of perception, but a symbol, the motility plays its role in the formation of the image […] and finally, the double contribution of genetic psychology, which located the level of image formation and specified the development of the latter with the development of operations" [10] (pp. 16–17).

In reference to this process of reacquisition of the view, it is useful to refer to Gilbert Durand who, focusing on the ontological devaluation of the image, implemented by French philosophy, highlights the question of imagination, imagination and *ostracism* recorded until in the 1950sto the concept of *mental image* in the psychological field [11]. Compared to psychological studies, those in the visual field differ from the former because they focus their interest on the predominantly cultural and aesthetic aspect of the images, experienced according to a point of view always conveyed by their own time.

Later, the art historians Michael Baxandall and Svetlana Alpers, questioning the relationship between the historical evolution of the images and the way of seeing them, deepening in the fifteenth century in Italy and the seventeenth century in Holland, trace the indissoluble link between the pictorial style that produces the artistic point of view and *mental schemes* that generates the cultural environment constituting a *cognitiv style*.

The importance of this theory lies in the will, on the part of the two art historians, of tracing the pictorial styles, identified during different periods, to the ways of experiencing reality on the part of the society that produces and observes the images. On the value of the culture of vision in seventeenth-century Holland, Svetlana Alper, in line with the theorems of Baxandall, states that «the eye was the fundamental means of self-representation and the visual experience the fundamental form of self-consciousness» [6] (p. 16), recognizing in the role entrusted to images an iconic power of sharing knowledge placed at the center of social and cultural life of the time.

It is a question of recognizing in the images all those social, cultural, political and anthropological processes that have produced them and which have determined, from time to time, multiple ways of perceiving their meanings, according to the means that have represented them.

Taking into account phenomenological reflections, perceptive psychology, semiotics and the latest frontiers of neuroscience on the cognitive structure of image acquisition, the attempt to redefine the word/image and reading/gaze, is traced back to Anglo-American *Visual Culture Studies* and German *Bildwissenschaft*, considering the attention placed in the last twenty years on the image also in humanistic and scientific fields. In particular, reference is made to the area that Pinotti and Somaini define as an *iconosphere* [6], a sphere consisting of images belonging to a specific cultural context, the technologies that produce them and their social use.
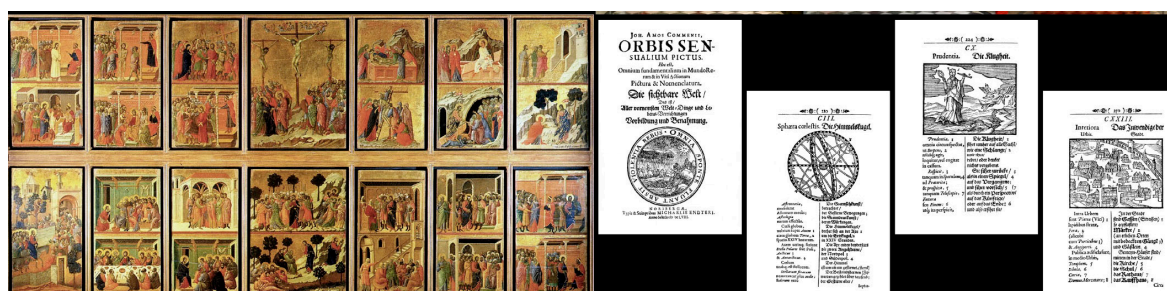
Figure 4. Images that build narrative paths (visual storytelling) and educational images, capable of forming knowledge and know-how (didactic iconography and iconology).

5. Visual Studies and Bildwissenschaft

The difference that characterizes the approach of the *Bildwissenschaft*, compared to that adopted by Anglo-American *Visual studies*, much more related to the contemporary, consists of the presence of a strong historical component within visual research, which has given photography a role of particular importance, establishing itself as a hermeneutic system for reading and understanding the image, as demonstrated by the theories conducted by Heinrich Wölfflin, Erwin Panofsky, Aby Warburg and Gottfried Boehm. The recommendation handed down by Panofsky [12] on the constant comparison with the original, to activate that process of veridical reading of the object, refers to the effectiveness of the *Skioptikon*, known as magic lantern, used by Hermann Grimm during his lessons or to the comparative Heinrich Wöfflin methodology with the use of the double projector [13]. We could talk about a further comparative device made by Aby Warburg, in the late 1920s, with his *Atlas Mnemosyne* in which he composes black and white photographs selected from different fields of knowledge and combined in a montage of images on which to start a formal analysis that Warburg calls *Pathosformeln* (formulas of pathos) [14]. These photos express a repertoire of diversified cultural contexts that allow to interpret the collective memory through the morphological investigation.

To speak therefore of a historicity of the vision focuses on a question widely discussed at the dawn of the twentieth century which historians and philosophers have confronted by supporting, on the one hand, the distinction between the physiological aspects related to the act of seeing and the man's historicity [15], on the other, an inseparable link between the observer and his eye [16].

Considering the *images* and the *vision* from the cultural point of view, linked to the social, ideological and technical transformations of the historical process, means also evaluating the structural aspects of the image–object, starting from the evolution of the multi-use devices that allowed the production and dissemination of images filtered by the use of new forms of visualization. Thus, the three-dimensional forms of image processing, nanotechnology, television, the numerous disciplines related to medicine, the natural sciences, anthropology, and documentation such as *Visual anthropology*, have made the emotional involvement of society ever more possible, focusing attention on the documental role of the visual. Furthermore, it is interesting to focus on the perspectives opened by *visual culture studies* in relation to the historical, social, anthropological and political processes that have come into being as a result of the possibilities of visual representation, through the activation of the symbol production dynamics.

Parallel to the socio-cultural transformation carried out through images, even *postcolonial studies* have constituted the visual, documental and informative structure of that East that Edward Said, in 1987, calls *Orientalism* reflecting on the representations of the societies colonized by European countries that generated further stereotypes, exotic from the perspective of western culture [17].

From the reflection on formalism and iconology launched during the twentieth century, the stimuli coming from the *New Art History* of the 1950s and 1960s contribute to broadening the field of investigation on what the meaning of the image includes and consequently of the visual culture. This area includes studies that involve the theories of photography and cinema, carried out by numerous artists and theorists in the 1920s and 1930s on optical media and technical devices that participate in the perception and construction of the image, concentrating mainly on the relationship between the history of technology and that of sensitive experience. In the wake of advanced

photographic and cinematographic theories, starting from the deconstruction processes of the image and the composition of the montage, the Berlin Dadaists, together with the constructivists and directors of Europe, gave life to a graphic combination mode for parts composing elements from diversified areas of production of the form and favoring a new approach of image analysis through multiple re-processing possibilities. It is clear that cultural image and experience are intimately bound in the field of visual culture studies, especially for the heuristic potential that is activated in the object–vision relationship, so much so that it is essential to take into account the historical and cultural aspects in the act of seeing.

In this regard, in the introduction to the text "Cultura visuale. Immagini sguardi media dispositivi", Pinotti and Somaini argue that "it is not possible, in other words, to separate the visual from the visual, from an act of vision that takes place starting from a certain culturally conditioned visual angle, from a certain 'look' […] a perspective view that, precisely by virtue of the assumption of a particular point of view, frames a visual field that does not coincide with the totality of the visible, but is cut out a look that focuses on some portions of the visible, leaving others in peripheral areas sloping down to invisibility, a look that has a blind spot and dead angles" [6] (p. XVIII).

The inevitable assumption of a point of view from which to take pictures, based on their ability to refer to multiple subjective possibilities of reading, is linked to the contribution provided by philosophy and psychoanalysis during the 1930s, as well as questions on perception advanced by Walter Benjamin, particularly interested in the influence of photographic and cinematographic technology. Referring to the dynamic action of the film editing machine, Benjamin recalls the syncopated movements of Charlie Chaplin considering him capable of interpreting the cinematographic device with his bodily gestures [6] (pp. 89–94).

In the field of technologies and devices that allow us to place the image within a specific socio-cultural and historical dimension, it is useful to reflect on the devices, on the methods of use and on the material and dimensional characteristics of the current devices that complete the theoretical structure, reaching the distinction between the analogical image and the digital image. The reflection therefore refers to the relationship between the image and its documental and informative nature, on the one hand and the consequential evolution of the latter in the digital dimension assuming a virtual appearance, while maintaining its epistemological significance. In this relationship between the images and the imagination that produces them—the idea of the brain as a device able to develop symbols, taking up the idea of Kosslyn—the key lies in the way of thinking, "moreover it is very unlikely that imagination can find an adequate place in an architecture of the mind based on the metaphor of the computer, and considered an information processor" [10] (p. 17).

With the pervasive production of images through the television tool, a series of positions will take shape related to the way in which the viewer disappears into the world of that visible hyperreal, in accordance with Jean Baudrillard, who traces a sort of overturning between reality and its image; to this is added the direction taken, through the use of digital technologies, in the process of transmigration from the material to its representation.

In the 1970s, the theories on devices formulated in the French area began a process of study on the theme of the image from an ideological and methodological point of view, exploring the different forms of graphic embodiment that led many artists to work on the concept of grid and pixels such as elementary units of definition of the final image.

The next problem formulates around the combination of history and aesthetics on the dimension of what precedes the act of representation, on the visualization forms that link science and art in the production of images [18] and on philosophical questions with respect to techniques and processes that determine the interaction between the immaterial and the concrete, between the flow of information over time and its concretization in images.

The profile that is outlined, according to the reflections on the images and the distinctions between vision, visuality and images, is expressed in transversal and multidisciplinary research linked to history, technology, culture and thought, as aspects of the social physiognomy that lead to an understanding of the relationship between images and the perceptual processes that are generated in the act of vision.
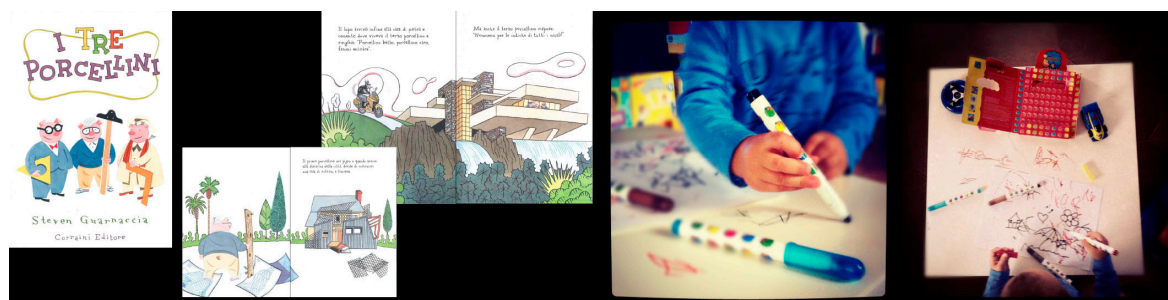
Figure 5. Images that enhance the narrative experience of the child (illustration for children) and experiential images in which they synthesize time and space (childish drawing).

6. Conclusions

The path that we have proposed precisely defines the reference area of the conference, identifying how this area is particularly hybridized by different disciplines and consequently suitable for interdisciplinary study.

The authors' contributions are positively heterogeneous, but can be organized into three major strands.

The first, less numerous, is composed of the authors who have approached general issues, often reflecting on the role of the different disciplines in the common field of the image–imagination relationship, with outcomes that merit future investigations (especially in the field of representation and pedagogy).

The second, which is also not particularly numerous, comprises the authors who have traced the genealogies and historical roots of current aspects of visual culture, as we have proposed in the central part of our essay.

The third, consisting of more than half of the contributions, is made up of the authors who, presenting a considerable number of specific and case studies, actually make up a broad and at the same time profound repertoire of experiences in the use of images and imagination.

In this varied but balanced set, the reflections and experiences of the keynote speakers (Andrea Pinotti, full professor of aesthetics; Andras Benedek, visual pedagogist ; Raffaele Milani, philosopher; Teresa Grange, experimental pedagogist; Stuart Medley, professor of Art; Giorgio Camuffo, Graphic Designer; Nicolò Degiorgis, photographer) from the most disparate cultural and geographical areas, who have proposed guidelines on how it is possible—and all in all easy—to define the relationship between image and imagination if the gaze that we put into being is, even if only in part, hybridized with other disciplines.

James Elkins, Art historian, held a Lectio Magistralis at the opening of the conference, establishing a path "in the infinite field of study on the image" in seven steps: 1. Because so few people have a theory about "what" can be called "image"; 2. What "is not" an image; 3. Aesthetics and Politics; 4. What is the "nature" of the images; 5. Images cannot be classified; 6. The limits of attention to detail; 7. The materiality of images.

From the two days of exchange and debate, it is clear that there has been a clear confirmation of how the field of research of the relationship between image and imagination is thriving thanks to interdisciplinary research, and how all disciplines are mutually enriched. Furthermore, the role of one sector in particular seems to have been defined, i.e., the disciplinary scientific sector of the Drawing, within the debate on image theories, which in addition to the *Graphic Science* must refer to *Visual Studies*, as suggested by prof. Cardone in the welcome speech:

I can say that we had been waiting for an event like this for years. In fact, at least twenty years ago we were questioning, perhaps rather slowly and perhaps not only us, the role of images in contemporary society and our role within the Italian university.
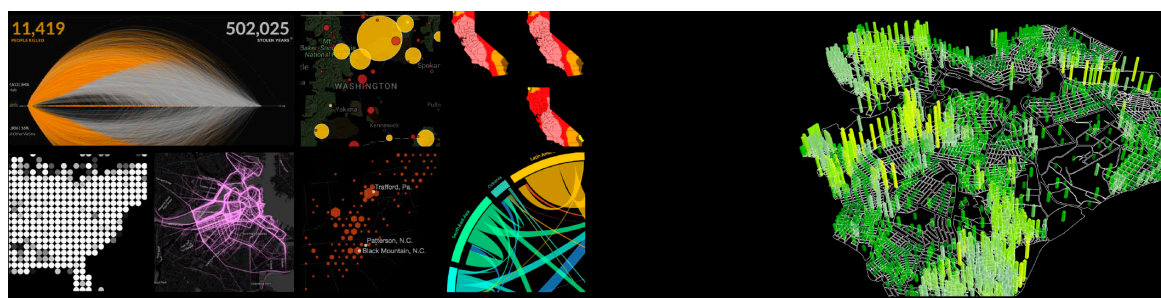
Figure 6. Images that stimulate the imagination of their user (visual design) and interactive images that support the imagination of the planner (processing and visualization of data on a territorial scale).

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