

‘MAPPY’ IMAGERIES OF THE WATERY CITY:

The cartographic figure of the Venice Lagoon across epochs and media

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ABSTRACT: Adopting a cultural approach to cartographic repertoires, this carto-essay highlights the immense visual heritage of the Venetian Lagoon in order to extrapolate a series of ‘mappy’ images that have given shape to the cartographic figure of the city on water. In light of the current convergence of visual culture and cartography, and by adopting visual juxtapositions, the article evokes different cartographic variations of the watery city: from the city sitting on the sea to the city sitting on the lagoon, from the port city to the archipelago, from the maritime city to the (wet)landscape city *par excellence*. This contribution thus proposes a journey across a range of Venetian cartographic imageries, which include different media and epochs, as well as different genres and registers, from the majestic to the banal, and from the dramatic to the ironic, thus also moving across the different cartographic moods associated with the watery city. As Juergen Schulz used to say during the 1970s while he was investigating modern-age Venetian cartography, the map is not always a map: in past times, the map was often a vehicle for nongeographical ideas. Even today, maps are ideas, they are ways of knowing, thinking and acting, they hold cultural meaning and political messages, but also hopeful imaginings. Indeed, cartographic representations of and rhetoric about the Venetian Lagoon are carried out by different actors, thus contributing to a process of continuous re-figuration and de/re-centralisation of the lagoonal space.

KEYWORDS: Cultural cartography, geo-history of Venice, lagoonal cartography, lagoonal imageries, watery city, carto-essay

Seen from both a physical and cultural perspective, the cartographic shape of the Venetian Lagoon is as elusory as the “figure in the carpet” evoked by Henry James in his famous 1896 short story about tracing the secret meaning of a literary work (Figure 1). The figure in the carpet, like the figure of the Venetian Lagoon, is here intended as a metaphorical place where multiple meanings meet and conflate, a place of continuous interrogation where we can proceed only by means of cues, such as cartographic ones. Following a cultural, hermeneutic approach to cartographic repertoires, this carto-essay will highlight the volume and diversity of Venetian iconographies in order to extrapolate a series of images that have given shape to the cartographic figure of the ‘city on water’. This visual essay provides an idiosyncratic journey across a range of lagoon imagery, which includes different media and epochs, as well as different genres and registers, thus also moving through the different cartographic feelings associated with Venice. The term ‘mappy’ is intended to highlight the huge heterogeneity of these map-like images, which vary from the majestic to the banal and from the dramatic to the ironic.

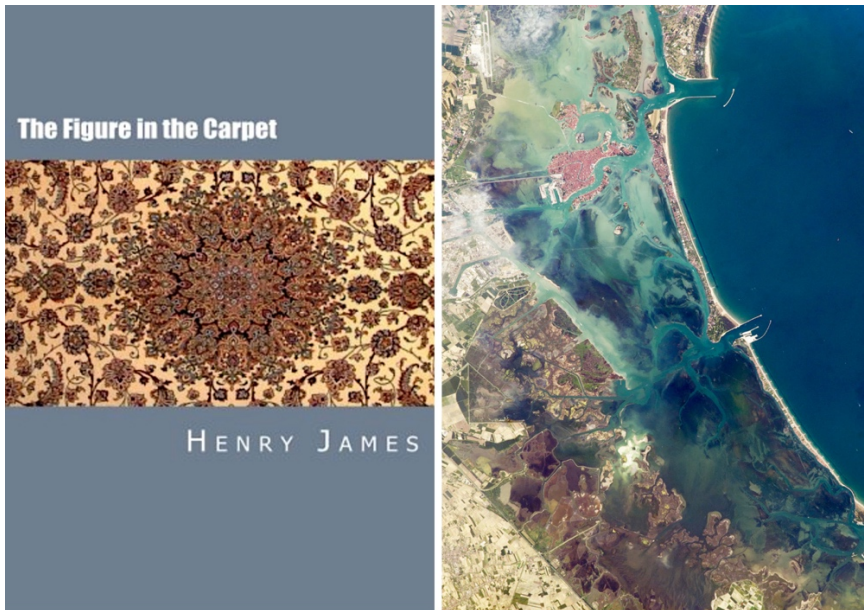


Figure 1 - The Lagoon as an undefinable figure. (Left, a cover design for Henry James' *The Figure in the Carpet* [2015]; right, Venetian Lagoon, May 29th 2014 [NASA Earth Observatory].)

Benedetto Bordone's 16th Century map of Venice (Figure 2, left) is one of the most famous historical visual representations of the Venetian Lagoon. It is so well-known that you can find it printed on souvenirs or banal merchandising. This map plays an important role in the history of the iconography of Venetian Lagoonal space, as it combines the image of the historical city with the image of the whole lagoon. It does this through a distortion of scale as well as a distortion of the shape of the lagoon. The lagoon becomes a perfect circle, a sort of ideal microcosm. Therefore, in the comparison between the original map and its reproduction on the T-shirt in Figure 2 (right), it is clear that something has disappeared. Where has the lagoon gone?



Figure 2 - Where has the Lagoon gone? (Left: Benedetto Bordone's 16th Century 'Vinegia', right, Bordone's map on a t-shirt [author's photograph, 2007].)

As we will see, this is a crucial question in the contemporary history of Venice. And it is also a crucial question when we explore the relationship between Venice and the sea. Venice built its fortune on the sea as an emporium of trade between the Orient and the West, a connecting point between the Middle East, the Mediterranean coasts and continental Europe. But was Venice – and is it today – a ‘city on the sea’?

During the annual event of the Festa della Sensa (Ascension Day), the Doge travelled to the sea, from St Mark’s to the Lido, to celebrate a symbolic marriage between Venice and the Adriatic Sea (Figure 3, left) – an event that still happens today (Figure 3, right). The performance was a symbol of both Venetian dominance of the sea and of Venice’s dependence on it.



Figure 3 – The marriage between Venice and the sea. (Left, Francesco Guardi’s 18th Century ‘The Doge in the Bucentaur at San Nicolò di Lido on Ascension Day’; right, Festa della Sensa in 2019 [author’s collage of screenshots from the Web].)

Indeed, the historical iconographies of Venice are filled with personifications of the city as a lady who sits on an (undefined) area of water. But, more precisely, Venice has been most typically represented as the ‘Queen of the Sea’, as in the Scudo Room of the Doge’s Palace (Figure 4, left). However, as a watercolour by Gustave Moreau suggests (Figure 4, right - where the queen is sitting on a marshy mound), Venice is not ‘a city on the sea’. Venice is *a city on a lagoon*. And it is a port *in* a lagoon. Historical accounts have often failed to define the peculiar shape of the Port of Venice. In fact, the ‘Port of Venice’ is, in itself, an ambiguous expression, since Venice’s ancient port was a flexible entity spread across the whole lagoon basin and formed by different locations.



Figure 4 - A city/lady sitting on (maritime or lagoonal?) water. (Left, Doge's Palace Scudo Room; right, Gustave Moreau's 'Venise', 1885).

The lagoon is an interface between the land and the sea. It is a wetland coastal area in a continual state of instability. Figure 5 (left) shows the drainage basin, which is the area of land from which rain and river water drain into the lagoon. The lagoon morphology depends on the relationship between the solid material brought by the rivers and the erosive force of the sea. Communication between the lagoon and the sea, through the three inlets, guarantees the survival of the lagoon. While the sea is vital for Venice, it is also one of the main risk factors in the evolution of the lagoon as long as it prevails over the accumulation of sediments coming from rivers. The balance between these two forces – rivers from the land and saltwater from the sea – has been crucial throughout the history of Venice. The ‘natural’ environment surrounding Venice, this marshy location, has been constantly reworked. The lagoon can be regarded as the product of centuries-long human intervention aimed at balancing terrestrial and maritime forces. However, it was only in the early modern age, when they conquered part of Northern Italy (Figure 5, right), particularly the area corresponding to the drainage basin, that the Venetians developed a deep understanding of the hydraulic dynamics of the lagoon.



Figure 5 - Conceptualising and managing Venice as a city on a lagoonal system. (Left, drainage basin of the Venetian Lagoon, 2020 [mosevenezia.org]; right, map of the Venetian State in the mainland, 1782 [Phaidra Collection, University of Padova, CC]).

Over the centuries, from the Middle Ages to the end of the independent Republic in 1797, the Venetians had to face the natural-geomorphological evolution of the lagoon to preserve it as a permanent site. Since the lagoon was economically and politically of primary importance, the Venetians managed to guarantee a precarious but lasting balance between land and sea. In the 15th Century, the lagoon entered a phase of sediment accumulation: it began silting up with the risk of becoming dry land. Through the diversion of certain rivers, the Venetians kept the lagoon open to the sea and preserved its existence. In the meantime, Venice had lost the leadership of the Mediterranean maritime trade, and the Venetians switched their attention from the sea to the land, investing capital in the latter. However, the end of the Venetian Republic in 1797 marked the end of the well-balanced relationship between Venice and its watery surroundings. The skills and the corpus of special laws that the Venetians had developed over the centuries to manage the fragile lagoon environment vanished. The lagoon lost its centrality to Venetian life. Under Austrian authority and then the reign of Italy, Venice was again established as a port. To restore the ancient role of the ‘Queen of the Sea’ (Figure 6, left), new economic strategies were launched and an important transformation of the Venetian environment was carried out, in particular, widening the lagoon inlets to allow transit for large boats.



Figure 6 – Queen of the sea again: forgetting the lagoonal dynamics. (Left, E. Aman-Jean’s “Venezia bella, regina del mare”, c1893; right: project for the new industrial port in the mainland, 1922 [Porchia, 2014: 25].)

Venice was again an important port, and the lagoon changed its role: it became primarily an obstacle to be bypassed. Competence in the management of Venice’s peculiar environment was lost, and the lagoon was opened to the sea too much. In 1869 a new commercial port, the Stazione Marittima, was established in the ancient city. In 1917, a new industrial port was built, outside of the ancient city, on the mainland on the interior edge of the lagoon (Figure 6, right). The commercial capacity of Venice was also enhanced by a trans-lagoonal railway bridge in 1846 and then by a road bridge in 1933. During the 1960s an oil canal was dredged to allow larger tankers and commercial ships to enter the industrial port. Through these and many other human-induced factors, the lagoon’s morphology was modified without a serious evaluation of the risks.

It was only in the early 1970s that these transformations proved to be the most serious threat to both the city and the lagoon, with the appearance of the first specific legislation on the lagoon since the time of the Venetian Republic. It became clear that human intervention was moving the lagoon in a new direction that was going to turn it into a marine bay. The flood that occurred on the 4th of November 1966 (Figure 7, left) is considered to be a turning point

in the contemporary history of the relationship between Venice and its lagoon. Following this dramatic event, the contemporary scientific, political and cultural debate on how to ‘safeguard Venice’ and its lagoon began. Venice definitely became the ‘Venice problem’.



Figure 7 - Posing the ‘Venice problem’. (Left, Venice on November 4th, 1966 [Wikimedia Commons]; right: still from the RAI program *Montanelli-Venice*, 1969.)

Critical reports, such as *Montanelli-Venice*, the famous short documentary feature broadcast by RAI in 1969 made by Italian journalist Indro Montanelli, contributed to a re-focus on the centrality of the lagoon for the survival of the city of Venice (Figure 7, right). Indeed, in these and subsequent films, the cartographic image of the lagoon often appeared to generate awareness and restore a basic knowledge of the complex environmental dynamics of the lagoon.

Among others, the problem of rising water levels and associated city flooding remains the most critical issue facing Venice. The perception of the sea is conditioned by this fact. Today the sea is generally viewed with fear. However, cartographic representations of and rhetoric about both the sea and the lagoon are carried out by different actors. Different actors produce different map imageries of the city on water.

The ‘city on the sea’, for instance, has replaced the ‘city on the lagoon’ in the narratives produced by the Port Authority. In the 1990s, the port entered a period of important transformation and regeneration, becoming the ‘new’ Port of Venice. It’s worth remembering that with the crisis of basic industries, the productivity of the industrial component of the port declined while the commercial component of the port began to show a renewed vitality. Moreover, the port has become one of the most important home ports for the Mediterranean cruise business. Significantly, the Port of Venice’s new trademark adopted the motto ‘Where the Earth revolves around the Sea’ (Figure 8, left): the sea is the protagonist.

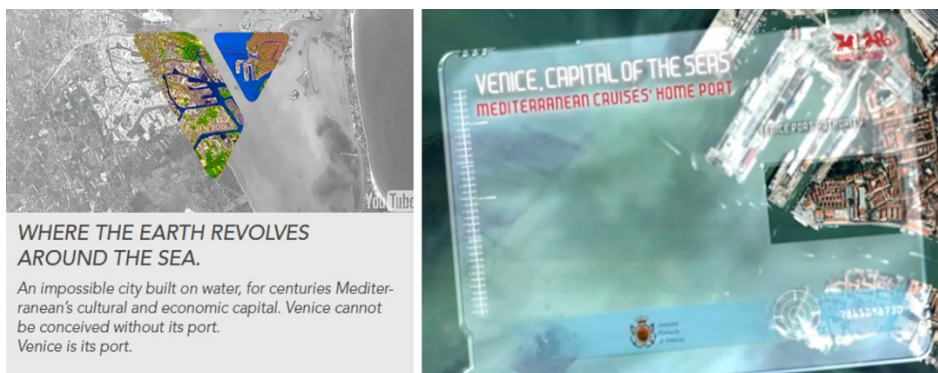


Figure 8 – ‘Venice, capital of the seas’: A new port of Venice. (Left, the new port of Venice’s trademark; right, campaign for the Shanghai Expo, 2010.)

Communication from the Port Authority is strongly connected with the myth of Venice as Queen of the Sea. Eloquently, at the 2010 Shanghai Expo, the Port of Venice introduced itself to the world as the leading Mediterranean cruise ship base with the campaign ‘Venice, Capital of the Seas’ (Figure 9, right). Connecting the past with future strategic changes, the 2010 campaign also talked about a new ‘marriage of the sea’ (Figure 9, left). More recently, at the 2019 logistic expo in Munich (Figure 9, right), the campaign employed maps as a crucial component to showcase the past glory and future development of the port city.

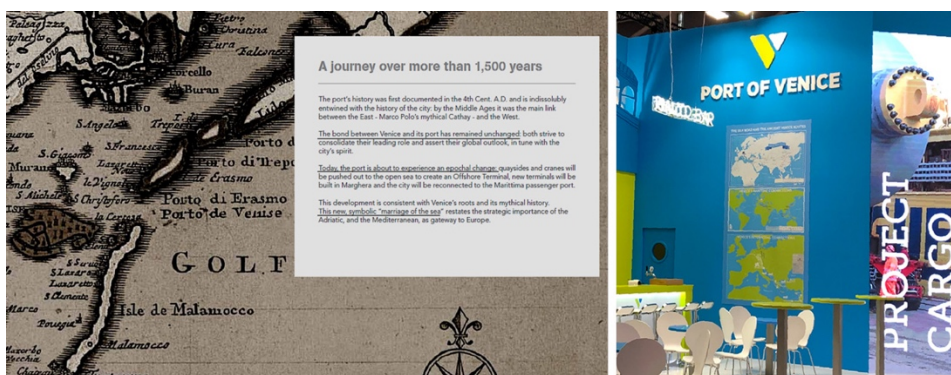


Figure 9 - Recalling a mythical maritime past. (Left, Port of Venice campaign image, 2010; right, Port of Venice exhibit at the Transport Logistic Munich, 2019.)

But maps also play a crucial role in the burning debate on the issue of cruise ships. As the subject of the big cruise ships, and their potential to damage Venice, has become one of the hottest debates in recent years, maps have been used by different actors in this struggle. In a television reportage (Figure 10, left), for instance, maps were used by the port representative to explain the proposal of an alternative route from the Adriatic Sea to Venice through a new lagoonal channel. On the other hand, viewing this project for an alternative route as the last outrage to the lagoon, protesters have used maps significantly in their campaigns against the new solution for big ships (Figure 10, right). Indeed, the necessity to show and criticise the different hypotheses to solve the cruise ships’ problem has put maps

centre stage in newspaper and online communication about this issue. And this process has contributed to a re-figuration of the lagoon (Figure 11).

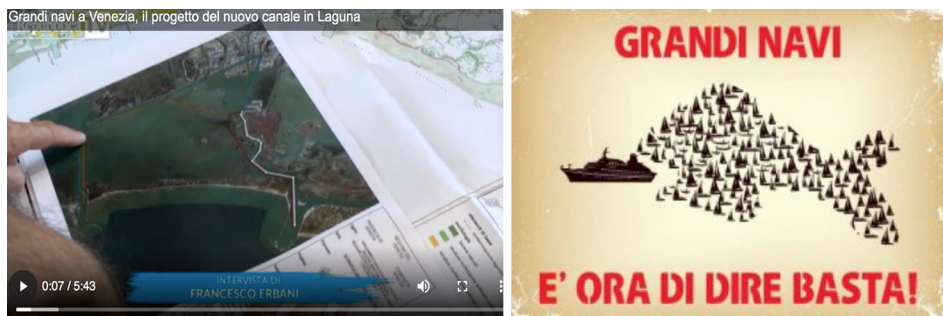


Figure 10 - The cruise ships issue. (Still from La Repubblica [2014]; right, flyer from protest against the cruise ships, 2012.)

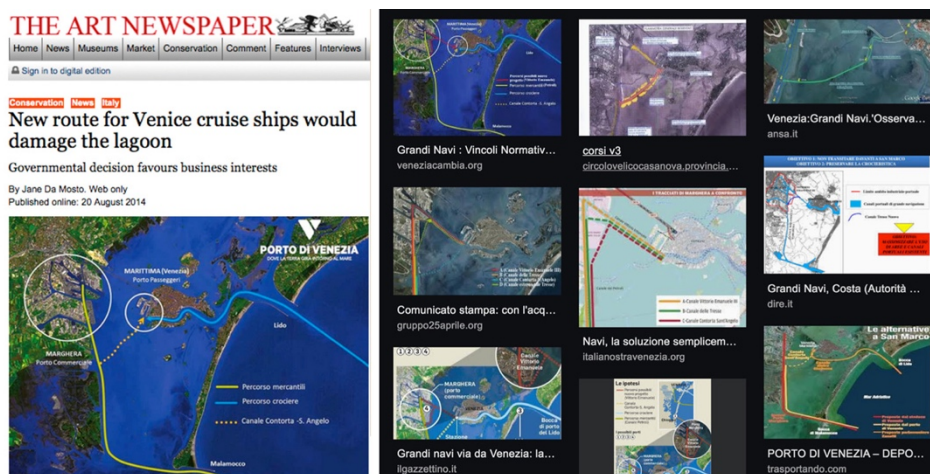


Figure 11 – Re-figuring the lagoon. (Left, Da Mosto [2014]; right, author’s screenshot from Google Image search, 2014.)

Recently, even the public vote, the referendum on the administrative division of ‘Venice on water’ and ‘Venice on land’ (Figure 12, left) has revamped the cartographic imagery of the lagoon in both institutional and creative ways as it happened in past similar circumstances (Figure 12, right).

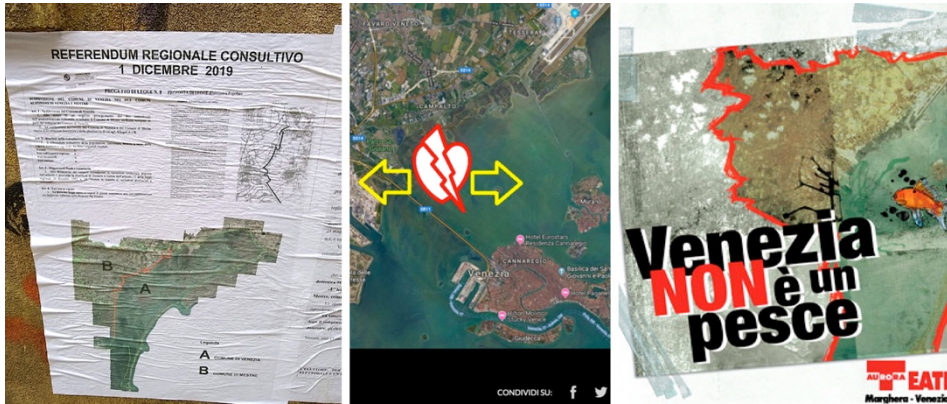


Figure 12: Mapping (un)divided Venice-Mestre. (Left, notice of the Referendum, 2019; centre and right, campaign posters against the administrative division of the Venetian territory in various years.)

Indeed, maps are continuously and creatively mobilised in alternative ways. In 2010, a group of campaigners produced a famous iconic Disney-style map of Venice to protest against the commodification of the city and the pressing phenomenon of overtourism (Figure 13, left). In other iconic maps, such as the one designed in 2011 for the Festival of the North lagoon islands (Figure 13, right), the lagoon is re-figured as a connecting, vibrant space.



Figure 13: Mobilising creative iconic maps. (Left, activist map by venessia.com, 2010; right, community-building map for the Festival of the North Lagoon Islands, 2011.)

With the recent dramatic flooding in November 2019, the map of the lagoon re-emerged in the news to display the disaster sites (Figure 14, left). Interestingly, on that occasion, the cartographic figure of the lagoon was also explicitly portrayed as the quintessential tool through which those in power control (or fail to control) the national environment and heritage security: Figure 14 (right) shows the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on a visit to Venice following the floods. He is learning about the causes and consequences of the flooding through a paper cartographic visual of the lagoon.

This persistent use of cartographic representations of the lagoon has also been animated by communication about the MOSE flood barrier (Figure 15, left), which is another current hot issue. Significantly, on the 3rd of October 2020, when a flood was stopped by raising the MOSE for the first time, a lagoonal map showing the sea levels was posted on the Municipality of Venice Facebook page to celebrate the successful event (Figure 15, right).



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While the last 2019 dramatic flooding revamped the debate on the current transformation of the lagoon into a marine bay, it is worth remembering the motto used in 2014 by a group of campaigners: that *Venice IS Lagoon* (Figure 16). To protest against the dredging of the new route for cruise ships inside the lagoon, the campaigners firmly stated that Venice is not a city on the sea, and that the proper colour of the lagoon is not blue, but green, that is the colour of the lagoonal water. The campaigners visualised their plan of displaying 50 green flags along the Canal Grande, visualising them against the background of Jacopo de Barbari’s celebrated view of Venice (Figure 16).

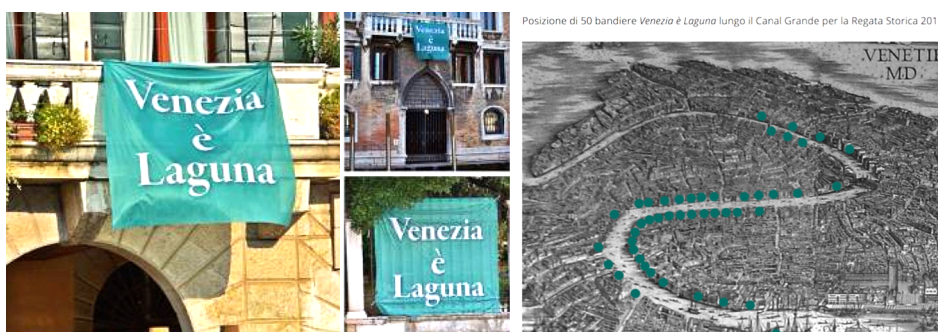


Figure 16 - Re-centering the Lagoon. (Left, Venice IS Lagoon’ flags, 2014; right, activists’ cartographic visualisation of the flags during the campaign, 2014.)

Now, as Juergen Schulz used to say during the 1970s while he was investigating modern-age Venetian cartography and, in particular, de Barbari’s famous image, the map is not always a map. As he later identified (1990), in past times the map was often a vehicle for nongeographical ideas. Even today, particularly within an ever-expanding ‘cartosphere’ full of disparate mappy images, maps are *ideas*, they are ways of knowing and thinking, they hold cultural meaning and political messages, but also hopeful imaginings. The Venetian Lagoon proves to be an exceptional case in point, thanks to an immense visual heritage, and also because it is at the vanguard of the current expansion, extroversion and diversification of cartographic languages and imageries within various media.

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