

Masters Project Report 1:

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Master of Design (DMSP)

Contemporary Art

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Introduction:

My report is a playful take on John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* series from 1972. There are many reasons for this. Firstly it's fun, but it also explores an idea I have that academic work on the Visual Arts should be inclusive rather than exclusive, and that an interested member of the general public should find it understandable. This eleven minute video explores only a small part of the work I'm doing this year, and it leaves the door open for expansion in the future. A reason for this (and here we get in to reasons upon reasons) is that I am corresponding with two scholars who are working on Canaletto. This correspondence currently runs to 17,000 words, and is ongoing. Out of respect for this work, I don't want to reference any of it directly until it's complete and the authors put it in the public domain. What I feel I can do though, is reference it obliquely in the context of a work of fiction that uses my own responses to that work. In my affectionate homage to Berger I also want to have a look at different types of arts writing and presentation, and see how this has changed over time – to revisit Kenneth Clark, a very young Robert Hughes, and of course the delightful Berger. In doing this I am at risk of falling into a trap I'm trying to avoid, namely making my work opaque to those who have never heard of Berger, but it is important to keep our own times and experiences in perspective I think, and looking at the recent past is one way of examining how quickly things change. It was, I can also say, a young Interior Architecture student from Hong Kong who reacquainted me with The Berge and thus seeded the idea for this, and I wanted to explore that reach of connection.

Referencing and Documentation:

A bibliography is included, but footnotes as such don't really work in the context of the video. So what I've also done is put together a list of the materials I have used and presented them in a sort of running sheet that shows their sources and the approximate times at which they appear in the video. I've sought to use materials in the public domain where possible which can be easily accessed via the web.

A Web Presence:

I have created a page on my website to act as a central place from which this ongoing work on Canaletto can be accessed. As has been pointed out to me, Canaletto is only one piece linking many aspects of my practice together.

<https://www.davidhume.net/canaletto/>

This page currently contains links to the video, referencing and documentation.

As this page develops I'll keep links to my other Masters Projects on it, as well as my SALA 2022 exhibition and (if it goes ahead) a project I'm proposing to the RSASA.

Video:

The video runs for 11m 30s and has been published on YouTube as well as linked from my website:

The direct YouTube link is: <https://youtu.be/S91MHBeHrFE>

The Script:

Writing the script was an interesting experience that I'd like to analyse further sometime, perhaps as this project develops. I wrote it longhand in fountain pen, and it surprised me that it was written only in three or four sessions and almost entirely without subsequent edits. This is very unlike my normal writing practice which generally undergoes many editing stages. There was strong sense of simply channelling The Berge and letting him speak for himself. The language is frequently alliterative, and much more florid than I would use myself, and I think it would be interesting to look at this, and see what balance of performance and factual accuracy there is. I've been revisiting a few TV art historians as part of this project and I think Berger holds up very well today.

Note – this is a transcript of the handwritten script from which the video was made. Even though my handwriting is nearly illegible, the advantage of the handwritten script is that spacings and odd dashes on the page can be used as an aid to pacing and emphasis.

----- STARTS-----

Venice is a riddle written in poetry.

It is an enigmatic mystery that has held its secrets for centuries.

Yet the art, the music, the majesty, is built on a foundation of science, engineering and ingenuity.

One of Venice's most brilliant sons is the painter Canaletto, whose languid and sundrenched vistas captivated a generation of Europe's young nobleman as they passed through Venice on their grand tours.

Canaletto's secrets; The techniques of science and sorcery with which he wove his spells are still not fully known to us.

But today, computers and complex analysis are revealing more and more of his magic.

I invite you to come with me as we ride a gondola of imagination to follow an Australian graduate student along the grand canal as he seeks his own relationship with Canaletto's pictorial mastery.

So who is Canaletto? And what is it that he reveals? Why do his mysterious methods intrigue us to this day?

Venice is a bewitching city, part glimmering mirage, part mirror to our own souls.

Venice demonstrates to us the apex of our humanity.

It rose as a refuge from marauding hordes - the nimble wits and slippery skill of the boatman who navigated its shallow marshy waters saved them from persecution and capture by neighbouring kingdoms.

A new way of government, a new architecture and new civil engineering solutions to its unique challenges were all developed here.

Once the world's greatest naval power, a trading bridge from east to West in the time of Marco Polo and the Kahns, it was by Canaletto's time a decadent, if still beautiful jewel.

Canaletto provided an illusion of Venice that was even more beautiful than the reality.

It is said that many of the English noblemen who came here on the grand tours of their youth were disappointed by the reality if they had first seen Canaletto's creations.

It is it any wonder the world has second guessed his secrets since that time?

As with any good mystery there are clues.

Canaletto has left us his Venetian sketchbook, so we can interrogate his technique.

A brilliant draughtsman in his own right, Canaletto was also the most skilled master of the camera obscura, a device that used lenses and mirrors to cast an image onto paper where it could be traced.

Canaletto's father designed theatre sets and his talented son had the manipulation of form space and perspective in his blood.

Why should this matter? Why should we now interrogate these drawings that were only ever meant to be tools used in the creation of Canaletto's larger works?

Perhaps it is all a matter of perspective...

We have in his sketchbooks parts of a three piece puzzle.

The pencil tracings, the ink drawings, the finished artworks.

We also have Venice itself.

We can go back today and place ourselves on many of the same places that Canaletto stood, where the buildings he drew stand as proudly today as they ever did.

The taming of perspective and the use of optics came to us together as part of the Renaissance the age of reason.

Galileo turned his lens to the heavens in the 17th century, and later Newton gave us a glimpse of the motion of the heavens through mathematics.

We were no longer wandering on a disc supported on the backs of elephants, we were voyagers on a globe that circled the sun according to the strict beauty of mathematics.

Is it any wonder that the mathematics that governed the laws of linear perspective should be revered?

And yet with the gains there came also a sense of loss...

Where was the magic? Where was the skill? The hand of the artist?

Even in Canaletto's day it was felt that the tracing of a scene was in some way cheating, and this view persists to the present day.

"Canaletto Cleared of Trickery" ran a recent headline, after it had been demonstrated by infrared photography that particular works were not the result of tracing, but that the master had drawn them himself.

Why should we care?

Hume, our graduate student working a world away from Venice in antipodean Australia would propose to us that this view tells us more about our own troubled relationship with photography and the photographic eye, then it does about Canaletto.

Our fixation with the mechanical minutiae of technique, he proposes, is something that would be dismissed by the master with a characteristic Italian shrug.

But there are more acute minds than Hume's at work on the problem.

Canaletto's cameras are currently being reconstructed and put through their paces from vantage points on the Grand Canal, being probed for pointers on perspective.

Problems arise when linear perspective is used to render realism from close proximity, particularly when, as in Venice, the horizon of water is all around.

“The problem of the join,” we could call it, when receding or approaching parallels meet before us.

How did Canaletto overcome it? By fudging it, propose some.

Hide it behind Rialto, or pop up a palazzo in its place.

Perhaps it is now time that we return to our central question.

Why bother with this analysis?

Is there any point to it?

So far I believe we have shown that Canaletto was capricious in his technique.

The order and harmony that we see in his works, we have ascribed to an adherence to certain laws of perspective of which Canaletto was aware, but which he either used or chose to ignore exactly as it suited him.

He brought us into a Venice that we thought was real, but was in actuality a creation of his own mind.

The sketchbooks... what of them?

Well, they are exactly that.

Sketches.

No more.

The rabbit hole of the camera is a chimaera; an illusion that is reflective of our own desire for order rather than any compulsion by Canaletto to adhere to a rigorous framework of rules.

The jury is still out.

Work is being done by scholars as I speak to you now.

Perhaps I will present to you a nascent notion proposed by Hume that what this analysis shows us is mostly that Canaletto worked more freely than we had previously imagined.

The solidity and harmony of his buildings has tricked us into assuming that the laws governing nature are also the laws governing Canaletto's art; but no.

The master has beguiled us yet again.

The seemingly solid structures he shows us are created mainly from the magic dust of imagination.

Multiple viewpoints in a single painting.

Multiple perspectives.

Some rules are adhered to, some are bent, and some are simply ignored.

Horizontals converge, verticals do not, even in his sketches.

And why should they? Canaletto had no need to produce sketches that were suitable for analysis by anyone else. His only imperative was to produce sketches that would be useful to himself.

Ironically, this minute analysis by scholars has taught us something.

The art historians amongst us, in whose number I include myself, should perhaps consider that here are many precursors to modernism in Canaletto that were previously unnoticed.

What we see now, changing perspectives, multiple viewpoints, we also see for example in Cezanne, who's still lifes were a harbinger of Cubism.

Certainly you will not see anything close to that painted in the extreme manner of a Braque or a Picasso, but a case may be made, I feel, for an embryonic shift in outlook towards that of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

A hint, perhaps, of what was to follow.

Is this real? Is it there, or is such conjecture merely a flight of fancy? If we were able to ask Canaletto himself I feel he would simply pause from his painting for a moment, look at us, shrug, and then return to his work.

-----ENDS-----

List of still images and video clips

Time (MM.SS)	Material and source/URL
00.00	Soundtrack: Pino Donaggio – <i>Don't look Now - Laura's theme</i> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZJ0df1LZVE
00.00	Historic film; colourized 1899. Venezia https://youtu.be/Vd-MuE3h8fs
00.25 and onwards	John Berger / <i>Ways of Seeing</i> , Episode 2 (1972) https://youtu.be/m1GI8mNU5Sg
00.45	Canaletto: Piazza San Marco with Basilica. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
01.05	Film: Vintage 1975-1978 Soviet Bloc Mainframe Computers https://youtu.be/2Um5QxLIBDY
01.20	Canaletto – video from exhibition at Museo Palazzo Grimani 2012
00.12	Piazza San Marco with Basilica. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
01.35	Canaletto – self-portrait National Trust Collections https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/515456
01.45	De Barbari View of Venice (various copies) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/View_of_Venice
02.10	Doge Pietro Loredan beseeching the Virgin (as one does) Palma Giovane – Palazzo Duclae Venezia
02.20	Early Drawing of the Arsenale, Venezia https://editions.covecollective.org/chronologies/beginnings-arsenal-venice
02.30	The Central Stretch of the Grand Canal (c. 1734), Canaletto. Royal Collection Trust/(c)Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016
02.40	The Bacino di S. Marco on Ascension (c. 1733-4), Canaletto. Royal Collection Trust/ © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016
03.10	Poster: Canaletto exhibition Museo Palazzo Grimani 2012
03.30	Camera obscura owned by Canaletto Museo Palazzo Grimani
03.35	Camera Obscura in use; early nineteenth century illustration
04.10	Canaletto: <i>Il Quaderno Veneziano</i> . Facsimile edition 1997 Pub. Canal Stamperia Editrice
04.30	Philip Steadman – Illustration for the article “Canaletto’s Camera” unpublished
04.40	Philip Steadman – Illustration for the article “Canaletto’s Camera” unpublished

04.50	Portrait of Galileo taken from mural. https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/the-truth-about-galileo-and-his-conflict-with-the-catholic-church
04.55	Portrait of Newton by Godfrey Kneller https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Newton
05.00	Perspective Drawing: taken from Perspective Rectified; Author(s): Martin Kemp Published by: Architectural Association School of Architecture Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/29543587
05.30	Canaletto: Piazza San Marco with Basilica. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
06.00	Haydock, M. (2017) 'Canaletto Cleared of Trickery', <i>Week</i> (London, England : 1995), (1121), pp. 30.
06.20	Perspective Drawing: taken from Perspective Rectified; Author(s): Martin Kemp Published by: Architectural Association School of Architecture Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/29543587
06.40	Hume, David – Perspective Drawings from a notebook (unpublished)
07.30	Canaletto: Il Quaderno Veneziano. Facsimile edition 1997 Pub. Canal Stamperia Editrice
08.00	Canaletto – A view of the Grand Canal
08.30	Canaletto: Il Quaderno Veneziano. Facsimile edition 1997 Pub. Canal Stamperia Editrice
10.00	Canaletto – A view of the Grand Canal Towards Rialto – Metropolitan Museum of Art. Sketch from the Lehman Collection.
10.15	Canaletto – A view of the Grand Canal Towards Rialto.
10.25	Paul Cezanne – Still life with a chest of drawers
10.30	Pablo Picasso The Studio (1955) Tate Gallery, London.

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