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The Duke in His Domain

Abstract:

The Duke Vespasiano Gonzaga (1621-1687) was a true renaissance man. A prince, soldier, poet, artist and architect, he lived amidst the emergent and unstable origins of the architectural discipline. He created through force of will the città ideale of Sabbioneta, a place that in conflating the military and civic gives insight into the militarised mindset that helped birth the discipline we recognise today. Sabbioneta is the result of this mindset: the Duke was free to explore his existential condition through the medium of architecture. One means he used to achieve this was a theatre he commissioned at the centre of Sabbioneta, designed by Vincenzo Scamozzi. The theatre was a space, housing a stage-set representation of the surrounding city, for the Duke to viscerally engage with the ideal, militarised world created around and through him.

The paper will show how the duke and his domain, interacted with via the theatre space at Sabbioneta, can act as allegory for the architect in his studio space. The paper blurs agencies of the military and the architectural, with the designer's role as viscerally engaged with and immersed within the design process discussed in this context.

Keywords: process, methodology, installation, representation, allegory, agency

Revealing design: a dialogic approach

This paper takes its title from Truman Capote's infamous 1957 profile of the actor Marlon Brando, published in *The New Yorker* as *The Duke in His Domain*. The profile can be considered a deeply ironic Socratic dialogue in which the nominally innocent party – Capote – teases out the information he requires from the oblivious Brando, plied with alcohol and rendered temporarily ignorant of Capote's journalistic vocation and the duplicitous intent with which he is operating. Brando enjoys the role of the relaxed expert, his heedless manner unmindful of the true context of the conversation. Over the course of almost six hours, he reveals his innermost thoughts to Capote, who rather than relying on the giveaway tools of the profession, committed the conversation to memory – his belief being his accuracy for verbatim conversation was “over 90%” (Inge 1987, p.297). Indeed, after realising what had happened, Brando unsuccessfully pleaded with Capote not to publish the story. Capote, of course, wasn't particularly interested in Brando: he was interested in the dialogue as a medium, and the manner by which its expression through his skilful, embodied craft could challenge the journalistic status quo and draw attention to the underlying structural aspects of his discipline over which he desired to demonstrate mastery:

I realized that [the most banal thing in journalism] would be an interview with a film star... so I put a number of names in a hat and pulled out, God knows why, Marlon Brando... So I went to Japan (where Marlon was making *Sayonara*) and spent the prescribed time -- one evening... and then spent a year on the piece because it had to be perfection, because my part was to take this banal thing and turn it into a work of art... Lots of people can't understand why I wrote it, especially Marlon Brando. (Inge 1987, p.41)

This paper concerns a very different duke: the duke Vespasiano Gonzaga (*fig.01*) of the feudal Gonzaga dynasty active in the late Italian Renaissance. His domain was the *città ideale* of Sabbioneta, which he conceived, founded and used as both personal fortress and residence. The object of situating the duke at the centre of this study is not historical illumination per se, but to establish a dialogue with him that sheds light on the contemporary architectural design process. The duke is a tool, as Brando was to Capote. The paper situates the duke as allegorical to the embodied architect at the centre of the design process, and so to unpack his relationship to his surrounds – his domain – is to reveal aspects of this design process. In this way, the duke takes on a metaleptic role: his relationship to Sabbioneta, and the creative process embodied by both individual and city, is interrogated as a means of understanding the relationship

of the designer to their design process. The objective of this dialogue is to demonstrate the divarication of meanings and possibilities that emerge when the design process is itself situated as the oblique focus of architectural study, such that, as for Capote, the structural aspects of the discipline take precedence over the presupposed subjects and outputs. Varied and tangible phenomena are embedded, often concealed, within the design process itself, and so by drawing attention to process in this study it is hoped that the relationships between the elements that constitute it can be revealed, along with their myriad qualities and, significantly, their various agencies. These agencies belong to representational modes and media that are mediated by the nature of the spaces they occupy. These spaces conflate and interact in what we can loosely describe as 'the studio space': the site of the design process; the domain of the architect.



FIG.1: Antonis Mor, Ritratto di Vespasiano Gonzaga, oil on panel.

The paper argues that this space is little understood in its contemporaneous condition, and rarely acknowledged in architectural design. To engage with it and the relationships therein is necessarily challenging in that it requires an awareness of the subjectivity of the self in relation to one's design process, and an ability to negotiate the entangled and reciprocal dialogue generated by such a milieu. To circumvent, or

indeed illustrate this phenomenon, a more confrontational relationship between designer and design process is required. This paper finds the possibility of this confrontation through the allegory of the duke.

This argument is structured as follows. First, it is necessary to establish and reflect upon the complex relationship of the embodied designer to the studio space in which he operates. A conceptualisation of this relationship between designer and process will then be discussed through the lens of the duke of Sabbioneta. The duke and his ideal city share a number of key qualities with the designer and the studio space. By engaging the duke in a dialogue, it will be demonstrated that the architect and the studio space share a challenging and problematic relationship not unlike the duke and his domain, in which the embodied designer is entangled and trapped within the agencies of representational modes, not just as an external process – but as an internalised understanding of space.

The studio as site

It is already well established that there is a real value in the drawing or model as an end point to an architectural line of enquiry, rather than the physical presence of built forms that often presuppose architectural interest. In her expatiation on Duchamp's artistic practice, *Marcel Duchamp and the Architecture of Desire*, Penelope Haralambidou describes what she terms the architecture of desire – that of the suspended pleasure, arguably specific to architectural representation, of the reconstructed imagination in the drawing out and between disparate elements to envision the whole. This desire repositions the built as no longer being the destination of the design process, but rather a possibility alluded to in order to generate and maintain the pleasure of the imagined architecture experienced through its representation. This architecture is constructed within and held between the observer and the space in which the representational mode lies and, as such, mediates between imagined and perceived space. This allows the architecture within representational modes a freedom illusive to the built form, while relying on the knowledge of the built for this freedom: as Elizabeth Diller phrases it, "...without the expectation of the built, the imagined or unbuilt – or the unbuildable – would have little resonance." (Diller 2001, p.131). The construction of this imagined architecture is necessarily differentiated from its critical understanding in the traditional sense, either as a means-to-an-end (the built form) or as holding otherwise useful meaning through its coding and phenomena. Robin Evans shows us that, while art and architecture criticism generally focus on revealing meaning, on getting "behind, beneath or within the subjects of

criticism" (Evans 1984, p.482), the architectural drawing is instead capable of generating a space in front of itself by establishing a direct connection to the imagination of the observer. In discussing Libeskind's *Chamber Works* drawings (fig.02), Evans asserts that they "...can be fantasized into three dimensions, given sufficient volition in the observer, for the space is thought into them by him, not projected out of them by the draftsman." (Evans 1984, p.486). Evans demonstrates that the observer's relationship to the architectural drawing is not necessarily one of gaining understanding, but is rather a performative act that interprets and in itself generates architectural entities or events. This is described in the introduction to his essay as "a telescoping of different registers of the architectural sign onto the same immanent plane" (Evans 1984, p.480), so that although Evans positions the observer as a frontal subject, he is one that occupies the same surface as the architectural space held within the representational artefact, and cannot be considered as entirely distinct from it.

This conceptualisation of the immanent plane recalls Jonathan Crary's description of Goethe's study of afterimages in the *camera obscura* as images that *belong to the eye*:

For Goethe... vision is always an irreducible complex of elements belonging to the observer's body and of external data. Thus the kind of separation between interior representation and exterior reality implicit in the camera obscura becomes in Goethe's work a single surface of affect on which interior and exterior have few of their former meanings and positions. (Crary 1988, p.6)

The single surface of affect transforms and empowers the possibilities inherent to the immanent plane with a transience fundamental to an understanding of the nature of the studio space. In engaging the imagination with fixed representational modes, the performative act of architecture that Haralambidou terms architectural desire is a meeting of observer and representation. The afterimages within the camera obscura that Goethe is fascinated by, on the other hand, describes a space itself in flux, where affects – and the meanings embedded within them – change and mutate with rapidity: "observation as the play and interaction of forces and relations" (Crary 1988, p.10). While the body is central to both, in the latter model meaning is something to be grasped at before it disappears: the afterimage fades on the retina. To phrase it differently, here desire is imbued with an urgency; an urgency born of the need for the designer to recognise and utilise the coded meanings embedded on the surface of affect he shares with the representational modes he is engaged with as they come into view.

To conceive of the studio space in this fashion is to establish it as a continuum in which the designer is embroiled, with every change made to the designer's process

generating ramifications – drawings reconfigured individually generating mismatches in the whole, for example. This whole is thus never fixed to the observer's understanding as it has the potential to be in the individual drawing, nor is it linear in its progression, but rather it gains or loses cohesion as its myriad elements are interacted with, displaced, deleted and repositioned. The studio space, in this understanding, is no more fixed in its inter-relationships than the internalised imagination of the observer – in fact it acts as an extension and spatialisation of this imagination, “the viewing body and its objects begin to constitute a single field on which inside and outside are confounded.” (Crary 1988, p.7).

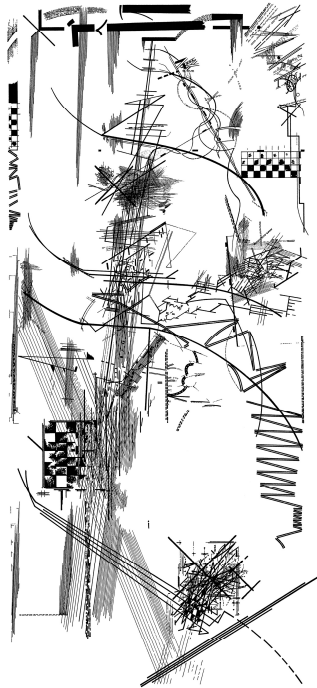


FIG.2: Daniel Libeskind (1983) Chamberworks III-V, pencil

Goethe's proto-phenomenological revelations concerning the camera obscura fundamentally challenge the relationship between ideal Cartesian space and our embodied perception of reality. By embedding the corporeal subjectivity of the observer into the notionally representationally pure image held by the camera obscura, Goethe irre-

versibly merges and blends the two. However, to this day architectural representation remains largely fixed in the language of Cartesian space. Haralambidou declares dissatisfaction at this, compelling her to challenge “the established syntax of representational codes” (Haralambidou 2013, p.14):

...frustrated by the fact that even in its contemporary digital phase architectural drawing relies on orthographic projection and a Cartesian understanding of homogeneous space, I sought to unravel its foundation. (Haralambidou 2013, p.13)

As the contemporary digital phase seems to expand Cartesian space further into other spaces in architectural thought, the role of the subjective designer as mediator between the two is, indeed, fundamentally challenged. If the studio space can be conceived of as a single surface of affect in which a conflation of spaces of different types occurs, then the imagination of the embodied designer is necessarily the point at which one space can be communicated into or through another. As Cartesian space becomes dominant in this dialogue, it has an effect on the physicality of the studio space as perceived by the senses:

CAD applies this Cartesian approach to scale in architectural drawings by forgoing the senses to assume scale is solely in the mind. Data is recorded at 1:1 or full scale, but the size of the screen image indefinitely varies as the operator zooms in or out to consider various aspects, creating the inability to put them into a perceivable relation to the operator’s body. (Emmons 2005, p.232)

As Emmons describes, in moving from hand drawings to CAD, “‘man the measure’ is replaced with ‘man the measurer’.” (Emmons 2005, p.232). The role of the imagination of the designer in this relationship is transformed. While, as we have seen, the designer as observer shares the same surface of affect as the CAD image, as he did with the hand drawn image, the dynamic between the observer’s embodied imagination – “the physical act of imagination” (Emmons 2005, p.233) – and the cold algorithmic logic of Cartesian space has shifted in favour of the latter. As decisions are made *through* CAD, the studio space becomes more responsive to the agency of the program than the agency of the observer – and as such, the design process as cohesive whole re-orientates to follow Cartesian understanding as opposed to human.

In order to reveal this shift of priority in the design process, it is necessary to make the design process *the* focus of study and attention, as opposed to the individual elements that constitute it (representational modalities and their held spaces, architectural desire and the imagination of the observer, built forms as anchors of meaning and boundaries). Despite the apparent marginalisation of the studio space in contemporary architectural design, it remains the site of the design process, the surface on and through which it operates. The studio can be conceived as

“...a key site of architectural production, yet it is not often thematised or reflected upon in any rigorous way. [Architectural representations] are always apart from the sites for which they are destined...The studio thus appears as a kind of space of transmission, a space through which something has to be sent, which would suggest that to admit it into the architectural project, and to welcome its effects, would be something akin to welcoming interference on a telephone line.”(Stasus 2012, p.15).

To allow this interference is to become aware not only of the relationships between the constituent elements of a design process, but the seemingly hidden structure and agency of these relationships¹. It is necessary to become confronted with these agencies; to make it difficult for them to change unnoticed. Goethe allows us to confront the conceptualisation of the studio space established here, while remaining within it: The eye cannot for a moment remain in a particular state determined by the object it looks upon. On the contrary, it is forced to a sort of opposition, which, in contrasting extreme with extreme, intermediate degree with intermediate degree, at the same time combines these opposite impressions, and thus ever tends to be whole, whether the impressions are successive or simultaneous and confined to one image. (Crary 1988, p.10)

Thus we can shift the priority of our focus as architects engaged with the design process, away from the individual representations, contexts, ideologies and built forms that normally preoccupy us, and concern ourselves instead with the structure of the process itself: a wholeness embedded within and without our bodies, uniting interior imagination, external spaces, intermediate meanings and oppositional agencies on the single surface of the studio space.

The Duke of Sabbioneta

To return to the duke, and his domain, then, as allegory for the dialogue between designer and studio space established above. The duke was a true Renaissance man, a prince, poet, artist, soldier and architect. The relationship of the last two callings is of particular interest here. Vespasiano lived in what Victoria Watson describes as “at the historical moment when architecture, in the disciplinary sense that we know it today, had only just begun to emerge and was by no means stable.” (Madge 2011, p.5). Vespasiano’s reflections on architecture, Watson continues in the foreword to in

¹ This idea is explored in a different fashion in an earlier project by my practice Stasus, documented in *Pamphlet Architecture 32: Resilience*. Mark Dorrian supplies the following relevant quote in his introduction to the book: “the project is a dream of things in which the viewer plays the role of the dreamer.” (Stasus 2012, p.7)

the architect James Madge's book *Sabbioneta: Cryptic City*, "Perhaps inadvertently tell us something about the history of modern architecture that is often left out of more seminal accounts." Madge developed a particular interest in Sabbioneta following an uncanny first visit to the town he describes as a fog-laden, "ghost-like encounter" (Madge 2011, p.15) that led him to believe that

the architecture of Sabbioneta is, precisely, the architecture of a state of mind. Vespasiano Gonzaga was free, as 'professional' architects of his (or other) times could hardly be, to explore his own existential condition through the medium of architecture." (Madge 2011, p.13)

Madge goes on to argue that the fortress city and its key institutions, and in particular its theatre and palace, act as a personalised world in which the duke could test not only his ideas on architecture, but confront himself with his own subconscious within those ideas. Thus to start to understand the city is to start to understand the duke in a psychoanalytical sense. Further, as an 'ideal city', Sabbioneta embodies idealised characteristics driven by synchronous developments in town planning and defence. The cultural context of Sabbioneta situates it at a point at which the now seemingly distinct realms of the civic and the military were intertwined. For Vespasiano, there is no separation between the two, nor his position as both civic leader and military general. He is a soldier: and any account of him as commissioner – and to a large extent, designer – of Sabbioneta must take into account a worldview notionally distinct from that of the contemporary architect.

The soldier's view is a highly charged mode of vision. For Paul Virilio "the act of taking aim is a geometrification of looking, a way of technically aligning ocular perception along an imaginary axis." (Virilio 1989, p.3). This visual mode acts as precursor to a key development of the Early Renaissance, linear perspective:

In the act of focusing, with its proper angles, blind spots and exposure times, the line of sight already heralds the perspectival vanishing line of the easel painter who, as in the case of Durer or Leonardo, might also be a military engineer or an expert in siege warfare. (Virilio 1989, p.63)

The development of linear perspective dramatically reconfigured spatial understanding in Western thought. The unification afforded by a single vanishing point, which enabled all objects a fixed spatial and proportional relationship with each other, seemed to establish for the perspectival painting a kind of divine accuracy. Whereas in the paintings – and accordingly, theoretical thought – of antiquity "the totality of the world always remained something radically discontinuous" (Panofsky 1997, p.44), linear perspective seemed to unify the representational space into a perfect whole. As Panofsky describes, the linear perspective as drawn differs from the curved perspec-

tive as seen, with lines attaining a kind of spatial perfection that is not directly akin to our monocular vision (let alone our normative stereoscopic sight²).

Perspective creates distance between human beings and things... but then in turn it abolishes this distance by, in a sense, drawing this world of things, an autonomous world confronting the individual, into the eye. Perspective subjects the artistic phenomenon to stable and even mathematically exact rules, but on the other hand, makes that phenomenon contingent upon human beings, indeed upon the individual: for these rules refer to the psychological and physical conditions of visual impression. (Panofsky 1997, p.67)

Panofsky demonstrates the confrontation that occurs in the viewing of linear perspective. Here we are witnessing a mathematically constructed space, but one that relies on the embodied act of looking in order to be understood. The viewer mediates between their immediate reality, and the reality of the image. A confrontation occurs when the perspective image desires the viewer's subsumption into its representational space. Despite the image relying on a specific positioning of the subjective viewer in order to generate the space as an imagined continuum, once this relationship is achieved, the viewer, through their gaze, is necessarily consumed into the mathematical construct of the image. Panofsky describes modern perspective in this way as opening art into the realm of the psychological, and seemingly reducing the divine into a "mere subject matter for human consciousness." (Panofsky 1997, p.72) which, he posits, has the seemingly paradoxical effect of expanding human consciousness to divine levels.

For the military mind like Vespasiano's the very act of aiming would seem to suggest striving for a divine mode of vision that supersedes the real. The difficulty emerges where it becomes obvious that perspectival space is not directly relatable to military concerns in real space. As ballistics advanced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it became obvious that Vitruvian principles of fortification and urban planning relied on until that point needed updating, but the visual modes that oriented them – the perspectival image being fundamental, but plan and elevation as well – needed rethinking or replacing as artillery shells, cannon fire and long range rifles meant that fortresses needed to be developed with a precision in concurrent three-dimensional thought that eluded the representational techniques of the time. "The single viewpoint might have been of use to a landscape artist, but not to an artilleryman." (Scolari 2012, p.296). This development blurred the lines between architect and engineer, and of course, military and civic thought.

² Stereoscopy is explored extensively in Penelope Haralambidou's *Marcel Duchamp and the Architecture of Desire*, along with recent explorations by Nat Chard in his drawing instruments.

The discussion of theory in relation to practice was resolved by uniting the various qualities necessary in the same person. In order to “perfect a fortress, he who designs it should be a soldier whose experience of war has taught him good planning, while the captain should be a good master builder.” (Scolari 2012, p.297)

Vespasiano, as prince and captain-general, would have considered the development of Sabbioneta as a reflection of his ability to unify these qualities. For him, it would have been deeply personal in its ability to demonstrate his qualities (and this is precisely why Madge views the city as an architecture of a state of mind). Although the perspectival drawing had been strategically abandoned in the development of fortification, it remained a key influence in the positioning of itself as the mind’s eye of the subjective observer who believes, through this new understanding of space, to be able to project the divine back onto reality: “It was the rationale of the prince who gave shape to his political design with his mind’s eye: ‘The mind’s eye sees more fully into general things that the corporeal eye is able to see of details.’” (Scolari 2012, p.297). Sabbioneta was for Vespasiano an extension of his imagination, a construct that represented himself back to him. It was a means of observing his desires, his craft, and his power. He engaged with it in a number of ways – but it is perhaps no surprise that the principal way he interacted with his city was perspectival in nature: the theatre at its centre.

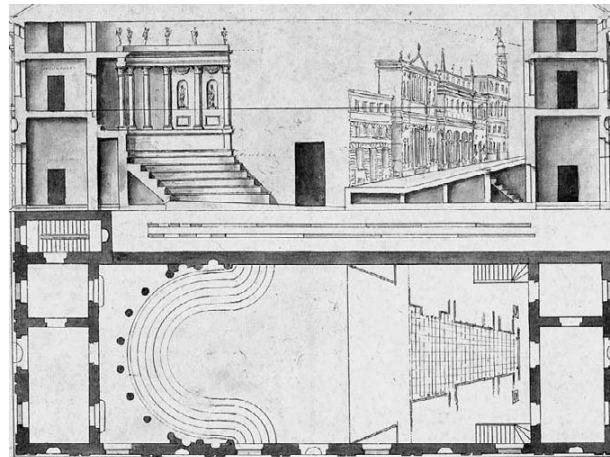


FIG.3: Vincenzo Scamozzi, Section and plan of the Teatro All'antica

The theatre of dreams

The theatre at Sabbioneta is the oldest free-standing, purpose-built theatre in the world. Designed by Vincenzo Scamozzi, the Teatro All'antica (theatre in the style of the ancients) occupied a prestigious location at the centre of Sabbioneta, in a clear example of the striving towards the ideal city the duke was implementing in his small town. The location caused the theatre to take on an unusually long and linear plan form. Scamozzi, who would himself go on to write an influential treatise, had just completed, after Palladio's death, the Teatro Olimpico in Vincenza. The Olimpico made use of an elaborate stage set (now the oldest surviving stage set in the world) which, in combination with a grand *scaenae frons*, created an optical illusion of long streets – a trompe-l'œil effect he would use again at All'antica. Here there is space only for one street, and hence for one 'proper' point of view. Accordingly, we can surmise that the form of this theatre, along with its unusual stage set, is generated outward from the position and point of view of the duke³. In a coincidence mediated by the body, the theatre has the same focal length as a standard military rifle range – the vanishing point embedded in the perspectival set approximating the location of the small target boards held at the range's end⁴. The All'antica does away with the *scaenae frons* of the Olimpico, and instead we find a "seamless continuum between the open gallery, the cavea, the orchestra and the scene" (Monteleone 2011, p.865) that suggests that there is no separation between audience and the stage. This may have been a result of the smaller space available, but seems intentional – particularly as the stage set itself is a recreation of the ideal city outside the walls of the theatre. The stage set is a microcosm of the city, and so its capacity for total immersion in making continuous the internal volume of the space is analogous to immersion in the city. The difference, of course, being here within the theatre, the city is viewed from the remove afforded and implemented by the perspective.

Haralambidou highlights Frederick Kiesler's reflection on Duchamp's seminal work *Glass*:

³ Interestingly, an acoustic survey of the unusually proportioned theatre suggests that it performs wonderfully: it's 'initial time delay gap' – the audible delay between projected voice and its echo – outperforms the majority of larger theatres. (Prodi & Pompoli 2000, p.2)

⁴ There is much more to be said on this connection, and a specific rifle range forms the basis of a separate but tangential study to the one documented here (see Ozga-Lawn, M. 2013) Of course what is being 'aimed at' in both spaces varies, as the rifle range doesn't compress space in the same way as the stage set. However, the rifle range would generally taper to a point in an approximation of the perspectival foreshortening found in the All'antica.

...to create such an X-ray painting of space, material and psychic, one needs as a lens (a) oneself, we focussed and dusted off, (b) the subconscious as *camera obscura*, (c) a super-conscious as sensitizer, and (d) the clash of this trinity to illuminate the scene. (Haralimbidou 2013, p.5)

Keisler's mapping of Freud's structural model of the psyche onto *Glass* seems to fit the nature of the space Vespasiano has created for himself in the Teatro All'antica. The duke mobilises aspects of his city to take on the roles of his id, ego and superego, in order to confront his state of mind and play-out his psychoses. It is a workshop for his dreams; a fulcrum between imagination and reality in which he can *see himself seeing*.

Jacques Lacan shows us that to see oneself seeing oneself is an act of total erasure of the self: "When carried to the limit, the process of this meditation, this reflecting reflection, goes so far as to reduce the subject apprehended by the Cartesian meditation to a power of annihilation." (Lacan 2004, p.81). Virilio uses similar language to express the soldier's influence on this dominant visual mode:

The soldier's obscene gaze, in his surroundings and on the world, his art of hiding from sight in order to see, is not just an ominous voyeurism but from the first imposes a long-term patterning on the chaos of vision, one which prefigures the synaptic machinations of architecture and the cinema screen. (Virilio 1989, p.63)

The duke, in confronting himself with the idealised city, is positioning himself in confrontation with the real. The ideal city is already problematized, as we have seen from the impossibility of the reconciliation of the linear perspectival space with the space of the embodied observer. Hubert Damisch writes of the *Urbino Panel* (fig. 04) – perhaps the most well-known example of the ideal city in representation – that when viewing it we are always searching for something, a vanishing point hidden behind the cylindrical central structure: a "curved surface over which the eye tends to skid." (Damisch 1995, p.170) Damisch imagines the panel looking back, its buildings bone-coloured, with teeth-like arcades and dark gazing windows.



FIG.4: Piero della Francesca – Ideal City

This reading bears similarity to Lacan's discussion of Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. The painting famously houses an anamorphic skull when viewed near side-on in collapsed perspective, but when viewed from the front, in the 'correct' position toward the vanishing point, the skull is an indistinct mass, seemingly floating near the feet of the central figures. Lacan describes the effect of this form as revealing the falsity of images, as a trap for the gaze. Mark Dorrian describes this confrontation:

The subjects encounter with the anamorphic stain is an encounter with the exhaustion and collapse of representation... the skull rips across the surface of "reality," displaying it as a signifier, as contingent, as surface, as "empty." (Dorrian 2003, p.106) By this account to encounter the ideal city as with the *Urbino Panel* would reveal the gaze, and the falseness of reality as represented. Indeed, this could be taken further as a reversal of Panofsky's declaration of the human consciousness elevating to the divine: here the confrontation makes clear the impossibility of divinity within reality. But the duke is not simply encountering a panel: he is immersed within a representation of the ideal city (the theatre) which is in turn immersed within another (Sabbioneta). The duke has unwittingly created a trap for himself, a trap which reveals not only the falsity of the real he is engaged with, but the fragility of his reality. His innermost thoughts are laid bare in the means by which he constructed and interacted with his city. And so, we return – at last – to Capote and Brando: the duke in his domain. As the design process is revealed, it reveals us, all the way to the core.

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