

IMAGING ATMOSPHERES: FROM VISUAL DIAGNOSIS TO OLFACTORY IMAGINATION

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IMAGING
OLFACTION
INTERFORM
BLINDSIGHT

This introductory paper proposes a shift from the image as object to imaging as act, approaching atmosphere as a condition that emerges through processes of mediation. Drawing from medical imaging technologies, imaging is understood here as a diagnostic operation: a probing mechanism that renders internal, otherwise inaccessible processes visually representable. Within this framework, atmosphere operates as a relational field that, like the interior of the body, resists direct observation and becomes legible only through its effects, symptoms, and dispersions. Here, the neurological condition of blindsight offers a critical lens, revealing a mode of perception in which something is regis-

tered without entering conscious recognition, complicating the assumption that visibility coincides with knowledge.

Within this framework, the olfactory realm emerges as a crucial model: operating through proximity, affect, and involuntary recognition, it dissolves the separation between subject and environment, offering an alternative mode of imaging grounded not in capture, but in attunement.

Atmospheric imaging thus unfolds at the limits of visibility, where perception exceeds recognition. Engaging with authors like James Hillman, Paul Virilio and Luce Irigaray among others, the text situates atmosphere as a field of subliminal emergence.

IMAGING – A VISUAL DIAGNOSIS

After coining the wordplay that gives this issue of IMG its title, I found myself in a situation where “imaging” stopped functioning as a pun and became a precise technical language.

In contemporary medical practice, imaging designates a set of technologies—X-ray, CT, MRI, PET—developed to visualise what is structurally inaccessible to direct perception.

What had once been a playful turn of phrase suddenly referred to a concrete diagnostic apparatus, searching for what was actually wrong with my kidneys.

Imaging, in this context, does not represent. It penetrates. It traverses the body through radiation, magnetism, and contrast agents—substances that operate like visual revelation inks. Rather than depicting organs as stable forms, they render internal processes legible through mediated interaction. What becomes visible is not the body as object, but its thresholds: circulation, permeability, intensity, delay.

In Italian as in English, *imaging* remains untranslated, it signals a domain where language yields to the mechanism of observation, where knowledge is produced through technical intervention rather than descriptive clarity. These images are not illustrative but evidentiary: sensitive images that function as data, as thresholds between visibility and diagnosis¹. They do not offer the body as appearance, but as a field of signals to be interpreted.

This medical understanding of imaging provides a foundational model for *thinking* atmosphere. Atmosphere, like the interior of the body, resists frontal access. It cannot be observed directly, only inferred through its effects. Imaging an atmosphere thus becomes an epistemological paradox: an attempt to visualise something whose mode of existence is immersive, relational, and fundamentally unstable.

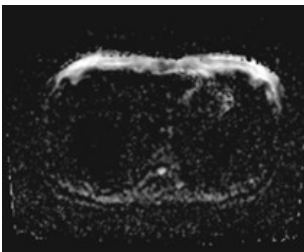


Fig. 1 Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan of the kidneys, axial cross-section through the pelvic region.

META-IMAGE: EDGING THE MEDIUM

The distinction between *image* and *imaging* is crucial here. An image suggests a bounded entity, an *object of vision*.

Imaging, by contrast, is a process—procedural, durational, and often invasive. Atmosphere inhabits precisely this intermediary space—what Proust (1913/1981) calls the *intermediary of an image*.

In his *Swann's Way*, he articulates this condition with striking precision when he describes perception as always surrounded by a “thin spiritual border,” an evaporative zone that prevents direct contact with *substance*²; objects dissolve before we can touch them; proximity never coincides with grasp.

A comparable insight emerges in Paul Virilio's reflections in *Negative Horizon's* introduction (1985/2005), where he introduces the notion of *interform*: the invisible, transparent relation between a form and its background. Virilio identifies the interform as a point of suspension between form and anti-form, an interstice habitually ignored by Western visual regimes³ which privilege isolated objects over the margins and differences that condition their appearance. As he recalls while attempting to paint an object, vision begins to waver: what comes into view is no longer the object itself, but its unstable fusion with its background—an interval that perception tends to repress.

Atmosphere, like the *interform*, occupies this neglected zone: neither object nor void, but the relational field in which visibility is continually undone by what surrounds it.

Imaging atmospheres requires precisely this movement: pushing visual regimes to the point where they must acknowledge what they cannot contain. The task is to go to the limits of the image medium, where form risks collapse and coherence becomes unstable (Gallagher, 2014). In fact atmospheres do not persist as stable entities but unfold, dissolve, and reconstitute themselves through time.

Imaging an atmosphere therefore cannot aim at fixation; it must engage temporality, emergence, and loss as constitutive elements.

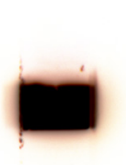


Fig. 2 Marina Marques, 2022. Negative scan of a 35mm film sprocket hole. From the series *Negative Origins*.

This is where imagination becomes operative—not as fiction, but as a cognitive and perceptual faculty capable of bridging what sensory data alone cannot provide.

As Huppaufl and Wulf (2013) argue in the introduction of their curated anthology of essays *Dynamics and Performativity of Imagination*, imagination leads from information to intuition, making visible what exists only as potential. *Imaging atmospheres* is thus less a documentary practice than an imaginative one: a mode of unfolding latent connections absent from raw sense data.

BLINDSIGHT AND THE SILENT IMAGE

If imaging atmospheres unfolds connections that escape direct sensory capture, the neurological condition of blindsight reveals that such gaps are already embedded in perception itself. There are forms of seeing that operate below recognition, where presence is registered without becoming image. The condition of *blindsight* occurs primarily in patients with damage to the primary visual cortex, who respond to visual stimuli without conscious awareness — offering a productive model for thinking about atmospheric imaging⁴. In blindsight, vision persists without awareness: stimuli are registered, acted upon, yet remain inaccessible to representation. Something is seen without being recognised as such.

A comparable dynamic often emerges in encounters with atmospheric images, where viewers register a presence or a shift without being able to name, locate, or stabilize it. Perception occurs, but without the reassurance of conceptual mastery. Within this gap between sensing and knowing, imagination takes on a different role. Ludger Schwarte describes it not as a faculty of fabrication, but as the capacity to “unfold a space of appearance”⁵—a space in which intuition precedes cognition and perception unfolds before interpretation can intervene. Images, in this sense, do not first present themselves as legible forms; they open a field

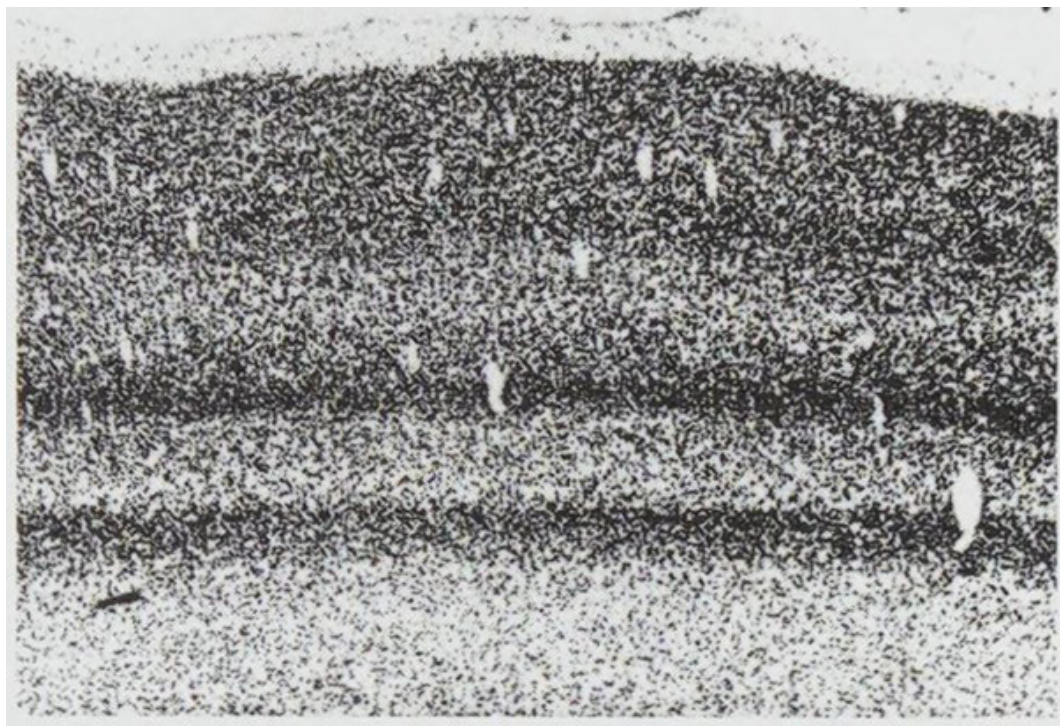


Fig. 3 High-magnification optical micrograph of the primary visual cortex (V1). Neuronal layers responsible for visual processing, which in phenomena such as blindsight can transmit visual signals without conscious perception. Adapted from *Vision: How It Works and What Can Go Wrong* (John E. Dowling & Joseph L. Dowling Jr., The MIT Press, 2016), Fig. 5.4B, p. 112. e.

in which something may appear without yet becoming an object of thought.

Dieter Mersch further sharpens this inversion by suggesting that to see an image is not to dominate it, but to encounter its transparency within visibility: what, in the image, looks back at us rather than what we succeed in grasping⁶.

Atmospheric images operate precisely at the threshold where seeing becomes exposure rather than control, and where visibility no longer guarantees comprehension. What matters here is not the solidity of forms, but their tendency to emanate, to give rise to something that exceeds them.

Atmospheres are not objects to be isolated, but by-products of matter in flux—secondary yet pervasive, intangible yet effective. They call for a mode of attention that suspends interpretation and extraction in favour of receptivity, attunement, and being-with what cannot be fully seen. “A stare is perhaps as far from history, as close to eternity.” (Sontag, 1969)

If atmospheric imaging operates in a regime where perception precedes recognition, then silence and non-resolution are not secondary effects but intrinsic conditions. What is at stake is not the absence of meaning, but the impossibility of stabilising what remains fundamentally diffuse, emanative, and contingent.

In this sense, Susan Sontag's reflections on silence are useful not as an ethical injunction, but as a description of a limit-condition: silence marks the point at which representation ceases to add clarity and begins to interfere with what it seeks to show.

Atmospheric imaging frequently approaches this threshold: rather than producing images that clarify or delimit, it suspends definition, allowing perception to remain open-ended and unresolved. What might appear as failure—the inability to fully articulate, frame, or complete the image—does not signal a lack of content, but the persistence of a phenomenon that exceeds the image's capacity to contain it. The image does not fail because it is insufficient; rather, it reflects the fundamental nature of atmospheric conditions, which resist reduction to stable, fully graspable forms. As Dieter Mersch observes through Joseph Beuys's works, paradox is not a problem to be solved but a structural tension that defines perception: something appears only to the extent that it withdraws from complete visibility. In this light, the impossibility of fully imaging an atmosphere is not an obstacle, but the very condition that allows atmospheric perception to unfold. It is in this in-between—where visibility is partial, and forms emanate without closure—that the viewer encounters the generative potential of the image: a perceptual space in which sensation, intuition, and imagination operate together, beyond the confines of representation.

SEE YOU ON A DARK NIGHT: OBLIVION AND VISIBILITY

Philosophical engagements with atmosphere have often circled around a paradox: that which most pervasively sustains life remains structurally neglected precisely because

it resists capture. Luce Irigaray (1996) names this condition the *oblivion of air*—a forgetting that does not stem from absence, but from excess: air is overlooked because it cannot be grasped, possessed, or fixed within the regime of objects.

A similar concern animates Gaston Bachelard's *rational materialism*, which calls for sustained attention to elemental conditions—air, vapour, diffusion—not as symbolic motifs or poetic metaphors, but as material processes. For Bachelard, matter is never simply given to perception, nor does it appear as a self-contained object, but it must be approached through an experimental rational system (Bachelard, 1975). Within this framework, the elements do not present themselves as discrete entities but as dynamic fields of action: air circulates, vapour condenses and disperses, matter infiltrates and propagates (Bachelard, 1943/2007). These processes exceed objecthood and undermine the logic of form by which things are usually apprehended. What is material, in this sense, is not what can be isolated and grasped, but what operates through things.

One does not look at an atmosphere; one finds oneself immersed within it. To attend to an atmosphere, following Bachelard (1943/2007), therefore requires a shift away from representational capture toward an engagement with material forces that shape experience. In his *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Paul Virilio argues that contemporary visual experience is dominated by fleeting images whose significance lies not in permanence but in their temporal and operational effects on perception. He highlights the increasing militarization of vision, showing how technologies of warfare—from aerial reconnaissance to drone surveillance—mediate experience by privileging speed, immediacy, and target-oriented observation over sustained attention (Figure 4). In this context, images are ephemeral not only because of their transience but also because they are produced within systems designed for action rather than contemplation (Virilio, 1991). To image an atmosphere, from this perspective, is to acknowledge its intrinsic tendency toward dissolution, blur, and loss.



Fig. 4 Clément Lambelet, *Two Donkeys in a War Zone*. Film still extracted from military drone footage. The work repositions automated imaging from targeting to the registration of peripheral life within zones of conflict.

Atmosphere marks the limit at which visibility begins to erode, where perception is shaped as much by what vanishes as by what remains. This legacy resonates with Georges Didi-Huberman's notion of aesthetic immanence (Didi-Huberman, 2013), understood as a generalised flux in which each thing continuously folds into every other, dissolving stable representational boundaries. Within such a framework, atmosphere can be understood as a site of folding rather than framing: a zone of turbulence in which visibility is constantly undermined by what exceeds it. Atmospheres thus inhabit the threshold between appearance and disappearance, not as neutral backgrounds, but as active forces that render perception contingent, and porous.

THE OLFATORY AS IMAGINAL PRACTICE

In atmospheric terms, smell exemplifies what cannot be separated from its source. There is no distance between object and odour, no clean division between subject and environment. This indivisibility challenges the logic of *imaging* as extraction and control, a logic that underpins dominant visual regimes in which phenomena are rendered legible by being detached from their conditions of emergence. Smell, instead cannot be represented without being diminished. As such, olfaction disrupts the assumption that representation operates through mastery and distance, proposing instead an immersive mode of imaging grounded in proximity and porosity. Within this framework, olfaction emerges as a privileged analogue for atmospheric imaging and as pointed out in Hillmans' *Perceiving Images Through the Senses* (2002) smell offers the most precise sensory analogy for the activity of imagination¹.

Olfaction operates at depth, precisely because it lacks an autonomous language or a stable representational system. Unlike vision, it does not externalise its objects or organise them into discrete forms. Smell is therefore at once the most

concrete and the least concrete of the senses: concrete in its immediate material impact on the body, yet elusive in its resistance to fixation, naming, and voluntary recall.

Odours cannot be deliberately summoned or held at a distance; they impose themselves upon perception, often triggering involuntary memory, uncontrolled association, and singular, unrepeatable apprehensions. To know through smell, then, is not to know conceptually or analytically, but to recognise—to be affected by something one cannot fully articulate, yet nonetheless unmistakably registers as present.

Heraclitus believed that the gods judged humans by their smell, precisely because odour escapes deception and representation.

The non-representability of smell renders it epistemologically significant. As long as it resists full capture and visual domination, olfaction troubles regimes of visibility that equate knowledge with display. It foregrounds an image that has a body but no fixed form—an image that cannot be fully externalised or stabilised as an object. This notion of olfaction as an immaterial yet corporeal image finds a remarkable precedent in the experiments of H. Devaux (1938) (Figure 5) a plant physiologist who visualised the volatilisation of odorous substances. As he described, when an odiferous material is enclosed in a cell a few millimetres above a clean mercury surface, it is possible to collect a monomolecular layer of the volatile substance on the mercury. If the surface is initially dusted with talc, the gradual formation of this layer can be observed as the talc is pushed aside from the point beneath the specimen. Devaux's images, published in the 10 September 1938 issue of *The Illustrated London News* and exhibited at the 83rd Annual International Exhibition of the Royal Photographic Society, capture this subtle process, rendering visible the otherwise invisible movement of odoriferous molecules.

In this sense, olfaction safeguards its imaginal dimension from visual overdetermination, allowing images to return to an archetypal condition.



Fig. 5 The Odour of Lily Made Visible: Photography of A Smell by F. Breitenbach. Exhibited in the Royal Photographic Society's Annual Exhibition with an Explanatory Note Headed 'Experiments of Professor H Devaux.'. *Illustrated London News*, 10th September 1938.

“In scent and taste, it is not only the object that is perceived, but the atmosphere that conditions our affective relation with the world.” (Tellenbach, 1981)

As Hubertus Tellenbach elaborates, atmosphere is an existential field in which individuals are already immersed.

For Tellenbach, the atmospheric is rooted in the oral sense — the primary unity of taste and smell — which provides an immediate, pre-personal contact with the world and with others, long before conceptual categorisation occurs (Tellenbach, 1968/2013). This approach situates atmosphere as a kind of *Mehr* or “surplus” beyond the factual, a perceptual field that cannot be reduced to what is merely perceived but conditions how experience takes shape. Tellenbach argues that in everyday life we do not simply register smells; we engage with them as affective cues that guide acceptance, rejection, trust and familiarity, precisely because they emanate and diffuse without stable boundaries. Rather than presenting itself as an object to be fixed in perception, the atmosphere for Tellenbach is a pervasive medium of contact that shapes our “being-with others” and our sense of belonging to a world. It operates like a pre-verbal, pre-conceptual field of resonance that conditions affective orientation long before we can articulate or conceptualise it.

IMAGING ATMOSPHERES AS CURATORIAL POSITION

To image an atmosphere is a predatory yet inevitably futile task: akin to following a scent in a field without knowing whether a source exists. The effort is guided by traces, intensities, and absences. The aim is not capture or resolution, but remaining open to the unfolding process itself, attending to hints and gradients as they emerge.

The contributions gathered in *Imaging Atmospheres* occupy a similar in-between space. They operate within the tension itself—between sensing and seeing, between diagnostic apparatuses and imaginative projection, between silence

and articulation. Nothing to be fully captured but a condition to be traced provisionally present.

Imaging atmospheres sustains a generative curatorial position of provisional forms, subliminal encounters, and facilitating legibility of something fundamentally indivisible and unrepeatable.

NOTES

1 Imaging is understood as evidentiary data rather than representation.

2 “When I saw an external object, my consciousness that I was seeing it would remain between me and it, surrounding it with a thin spiritual border that prevented me from ever touching its substance directly; for it would somehow evaporate before I could make contact with it, just as an incandescent body that is brought into proximity with something wet never actually touches its moisture, since it is always preceded by a zone of evaporation.”

Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright (1981), in F.R. David, “Rectoverso,” *Rectoverso*, Summer 2019.

3 “Western” refers to a historically specific tradition in which visual regimes rooted in Renaissance perspective and modern science privilege discrete, isolated objects.

4 For discussions of *blindsight*, see the neuropsychological literature cited in: Huppauf, Bernd, and Christoph Wulf, eds. *Dynamics and Performativity of Imagination: The Image Between the Visible and the Invisible*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

5 See also Ludger Schwarte, “Intuition of Imagination,” in *ibid.*, 72.

6 See Dieter Mersch, “Imagination, Figurality and Creativity,” in Huppauf and Wulf 2013.

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