

RECONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE AS TEXT: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS

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Abstract: One of the essential problems that concerns and provokes controversy in the field of conservation and restoration of artworks is the treatment of gaps in the visual field. Following Brandi's method, it is useful to consider the artwork, understood in its broadest sense, from objects to large architectural ensembles, as an *image-text*. The use of philological discourse helps us better understand the phenomenon of image discontinuity and especially to construct an appropriate argument for treating gaps. The absence of some fragments from the image-text raises the issue of the possibilities and limits of reconstructing the image's reading. We thus see in which measure the treatment of gaps is legitimate, in which measure the confusion between hypothesis and certainty or the use of analogy can irremediably lead to a fantastical reconstruction, and ultimately to the restitution of a false image.

Beyond the strict classification of gaps as *reintegrable* or *non-reintegrable*, the evaluation of image discontinuities is much more nuanced and should be subjected to a multidisciplinary approach. To maintain the restoration within the bounds of legitimacy, certain absolute values must be respected, including the respect of the authenticity and of the unique and unrepeatable character of the artwork.

Rezumat: Una din problemele esențiale care preocupă și provoacă controverse în domeniul conservării și restaurării operei de artă este tratarea lacunelor apărute în câmpul imaginii. Urmând metoda brandiană, este util să ne raportăm la opera de artă, înțelegând în maxima ei extensie, de la obiecte la marile ansambluri arhitecturale, ca la o *image-text*. Utilizarea discursului filologic ne îngăduie să înțelegem mai bine fenomenul discontinuității imaginii și mai cu seamă să construim argumentația adecvată tratamentului lacunelor. Absența unor fragmente din imaginea-text pune problema posibilităților și limitelor în refacerea lecturii imaginii. Vedem astfel în ce măsură tratamentul lacunelor este legitim, în ce măsură confuzia între ipoteză și certitudine sau utilizarea analogiei pot conduce iremediabil către reconstituirea fantezistă și în ultimă instanță, la restituirea unei false imagini.

Dincolo de clasificarea tranșantă în lacune reintegrabile sau neintegrabile, evaluarea discontinuităților imaginii este mult mai nuanțată și ea trebuie supusă unei instanțe pluridisciplinare. Pentru a ne menține între hotarele unei restituiri legitime a imaginii-text trebuie respectate câteva valori absolute, printre care respectarea autenticității și a caracterului unic și irepetabil al operei de artă.

More than two decades ago, I had the privilege of seeing, with the eyes of this century, and along the route of my own my professional experience, one of the fundamental works for the history of restoration in Italy: the intervention on the mural paintings by Lorenzo da Viterbo in the Mazzatosta Chapel of the Church of Santa Maria della Verità in Viterbo.¹

During the Second World War, a bomb destroyed more than half of the vaults and walls of the church, dislocating and transforming the chapel's mural paintings into countless fragments. The daring restoration, carried out over two years, starting in 1944, in the ambiance of the Roman Institute of Restoration, was one of the first large-scale experiments with the methodology formulated by Cesare Brandi in his theory.²

The author of the *Theory of Restoration (Teoria del Restauro)* coined the term "*integration*" (*integrazione*) for the operation of treating gaps, thus expressing the effort to re-create, to a greater or lesser extent, the continuity of the image. Gaps, as objects of the integration operation, represented for Brandi discontinuities with various morphologies produced in the field of the image and could be assimilated to the discontinuities of a text (Fig. 1).

Before presenting a case study on the possibilities, limits, and errors of the reintegration operation, it is useful to outline some theoretical benchmarks that underpinned, in Brandi's vision, the treatment of image gaps.

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¹ The visit took place on the occasion of the International Congress held in Viterbo in November 12-15, 2003, titled "The Theory of Restoration in the Twentieth Century from Riegl to Brandi" (La teoria del restauro nel Novecento da Riegl a Brandi).

² Giantomassi 2006, pp. 295-298.