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*Heritage Interpretation and Authenticity in the Perspective of the flowing of Time*

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In the last decades, heritage interpretation has acquired a growing importance and has now become a key factor in the conservation process. In the heritage field, interpretation today is an articulated process, which encompasses a range of activities, and aims to strengthen conservation effectiveness, promote social cohesiveness and improve education. In this sense, interpretation is often intended as a parallel activity in respect of conservation, but, in fact, it is at the base of our modern attitudes toward the relics of the past, and influences heritage itself, and its safeguard, conservation and management, from the general policy to the single concrete action. This centrality raises a number of questions, that require an in-depth reflection on the notion of interpretation and on our 'interpretive practice'.

Since the beginning, in modern care for the past, recognition of special qualities has driven the selection and conservation of monuments and works of art. Today the heritage family has extended its boundaries, but how much of this selective approach is still alive, and influences our attitudes and actions? How does interpretation relate to and influence the meaning of heritage resources? How can interpretation of the new 'categories' of heritage help improve understanding of more traditional forms of heritage?

Authenticity has always played a central role in giving certain objects their heritage status, and interpretation is a crucial moment of this process. But, since there can be innumerable interpretations of the same heritage item, according to the various historic and cultural situations, and to each individual as well – and all of them should be considered equally legitimate – authenticity must be recognized as multilayered and complex in nature. Which should be selected as the theoretical bases for further interpretations to prevent the loss of this complexity?

Interpretation is partial by definition, there cannot be any fully complete interpretation of the reality, we can only hope to build reliable visions that serve our goals. This is true, if referred just to the present, but becomes more evident when put in the perspective of time flow. What is valid today, cannot be any longer tomorrow. This consciousness has oriented certain branches of conservation theory. Today, one of the main challenges is perhaps posed by the pervasive idea that, while conservation works 'for the future' – and on this base the criteria of minimum intervention, reversibility, recognizability, have been developed – interpretation is 'for the present'. This approach has influenced the development and application of criteria like consensus, inclusiveness and accuracy. What are the consequences on heritage of a present-oriented interpretation? Is the gain of consensus around certain interpretations of heritage resources enough to consider them accurate and to be materialized? How can interpretation be temporally oriented, while still serving the present? Should it change its scope, and, if so, how?

Heritage interpretation poses issues and questions that refer to different existing ideas of history, to the inherent political nature of heritage, or to the role of time flowing in heritage perception. In the present paper, this complexity will be explored by synthetic points, to put in evidence that the growing technical complexity of heritage conservation, and its subsequent fragmentation into sub-disciplines, risks on the one hand to support itself and to lead to self-referred practice in the search of the most appropriate, effective, shared... 'how', and, on the other hand, to miss the challenges of the 'why', 'who', and 'for whom'.

## Conservation/restoration/preservation: always interpretation

History of heritage conservation has been essentially a history of materialization of interpretation of 'monuments', which have influenced their physical existence and duration, their success with critics, the relationships that individuals and societies have established with them – whether of belonging or disregard – or their recognizability over time, the understanding and assumptions we have developed of different periods of our history.

Cesare Brandi, one of the major Italian conservation theoreticians, defined restoration (in Italy this term is used with a meaning close to that of conservation) as “the methodological moment of the recognition of the work of art, in its material consistence and in its twofold aesthetic and historic polarity, in view of its transmission to the future”<sup>1</sup>. Recognition poses the imperative of conservation, and “conservation includes an infinite range of actions from the simple respect to the most radical intervention,…” (Brandi, 1977, p. 7).

In such a perspective, even minute actions such as putting or removing a frame or a pedestal to a painting or a statue, or the lighting of a work of art, has to be considered a form of conservation/ restoration (Brandi, 1977). Interpretation represents, then, the grounding act of conservation, before and beyond any real intervention, and influences the life of the work of art, independently from our conscious will.

In Italy, it is possible to identify more or less codified readings of our cultural heritage, especially of architecture, which have left their traces on its materiality, its image and our perception of them. Some of these readings have conditioned more than others subsequent interpretations and, in various cases, served aims external to conservation:



Figure 1. The Duomo of Amalfi before the restoration works in the second half of XIX century. (Civita, Varagnoli, 2000)

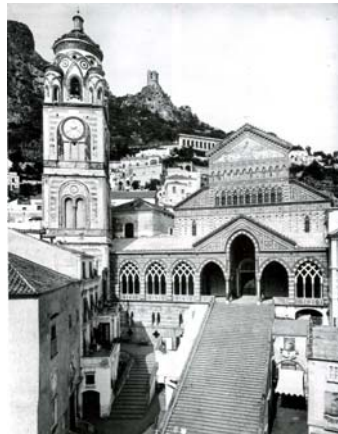


Figure 2. The Duomo of Amalfi after restoration. (Civita, Varagnoli, 2000)



Figure 3. Pisa, The “Palazzo dell’Orologio”, after restoration. (Carbonara, 197)

*Stylistic restoration* has focussed on the construction of a history of styles, through real-scale ‘exempla’, by selecting those parts of the monument considered consistent with the prevalent architectural language recognized in the building, and reconstructing what was missing to complete the image of the monument, on the base of comparative studies.

*Philological restoration* has recognized the essence of the ‘monument’ in the signs of succeeding phases and stratifications. These should be revealed and fixed in the image of the monument in a didactic perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> In his *Theory of Restoration*, Cesare Brandi defined restoration as follows «... il restauro costituisce il momento metodologico del riconoscimento dell’opera d’arte, nella sua consistenza fisica e nella sua duplice polarità estetica e storica, in vista della sua trasmissione al futuro» (C. Brandi, *Teoria del Restauro*, Einaudi, Turin, 1963, p. 6)



Figure 4. Church of SS Sebastian and Rocco in S. Vito Romano (Fiorani, De Meo, 2001)

So-called 'critical restoration' has implied, first of all, the identification of the value of a monument. Secondly, from this judgement, are derived the actions to recover the figural elements of the work of art, that constitute its image where its real form comes true.



Figure 5. The *Broletto* in Milan, after treatment directed by M. Dezzi Bardeschi (Carbonara, 1997)

The preservative approach has given the most relevance to the permanence of the existing object, accepted in its irreducible complexity and contradictoriness, with no aspiration to condense the reality in a coherent idea, and, on the contrary, trying to safeguard past interpretations and the possibility for future ones.

These positions stem from different theoretical and interpretive assumptions on history, art and human creative activity, leading to even opposing ideas of authenticity as well as directly determining different concrete results. Interpreted/restored monuments have influenced their subsequent understanding on both experts' and public's part.

*Heritage interpretation and presentation cannot be seen as a separated activity from conservation, being in fact one process of re-appropriation of/ separation from any heritage object, where the phase devoted to communicating significance and values is influenced by the very first approach to heritage at a general level, more than to the specific property.*

### **Integrated Heritage Interpretation**

Today, the major part of conservative treatments are carried out within major programmes for urban or territorial regeneration, put in place for special events. These are prevalently big economic and image operations, whose primary objectives are the economic recovery of a town or a territory (based also on the 'renewal of their look'), more than conservation, but represent also the most frequent instruments to carry out urban and landscape conservation plans.

The success of these operations are based on the ability of public administrations in presenting and promoting in a convincing way their vision of the future identity of a territory, around which coagulating financial resources and synergy of action among the involved stakeholders: from the administrations to the major real-estate or engineering companies, to the private citizen. Such a promotion occurs almost always before or during the realization of the works, with the aim of building both consensus among citizen and expectation among the potential future user/consumer.

Basically, these processes escape the participation not only of citizens but also of those responsible for the protection of cultural heritage. Besides, they inevitably influences also the activities of presentation/communication of the values of a site, by constructing and diffusing a particular image of a place, which partly represents what this place already is, but mainly embodies what is planned/ expected that a certain place become in the future.

### The multiple interpretations of Genoa

The experience of Genoa is, in this sense, exemplary: over around ten years four exceptional events took place. These have brought large resources which were utilized to create infrastructures, new areas for leisure, to renovate the historic town and to build an integrated state-municipal museum system. The objective, agreed at the political level, was transforming Genoa from a declining harbour centre into a city



of art to be inserted in the cultural tourism circuits. The municipality focussed on the image of the ‘beautiful city’, which was identified with the historic core and on which most of the resources was concentrated for urban recovery and conservation. To carry out this operation, only some aspects of the historical, morphologic, and material complexity have been selected to create the new image of Genoa.



Figure 6. Medieval Genoa. Palace of the Doria Family.



Figure 7. XVI Century. The Loggia di Banchi.



Figure 8. Baroque Genoa: the church of S. Siro.



Figure 9. Layers of history in Genoa.



Figure 10. One of the several hillside streets, which in the local dialect are called "creuze".



Figure 18. Via Caffaro, a

The epoch of the Oligarchic Republic, during which Genoa switched from an essentially merchant to a financial profile, has been privileged. The medieval period, during which Genoa was one of the major mercantile centres with colonies throughout the Mediterranean, and from which the town has inherited its urban fabric and several prominent works of art – or the XIX and early XX century – which bore witness to the first industrialization of the town and to the affirmation of values linked to the working class – have not represented a reference for the present ruling class (connected with an astonishing cultural continuity to that of the Oligarchy), and have not been considered to design the ‘cultural’ image of the town.



Figure 12. The Old Town of Genoa seen from a silos in the harbour area, now demolished



Figure 13. The harbour yesterday



Figure 14. The harbour today

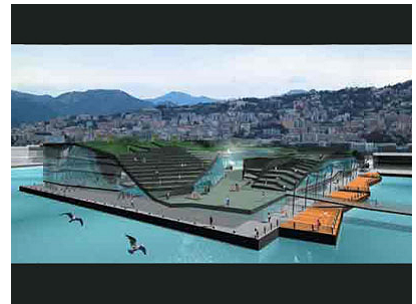


Figure 15. The harbour tomorrow?

On the other hand, the image of the ‘polycentric town’, suggested by the creation of the “Great Genoa” in 1926, through the unification of Genoa with several towns and villages nearby, has constituted the wider framework for planning more general programmes for mobility and productive facilities<sup>2</sup> improvement.

To these images, that have served as *leit-motifs* to guide the regeneration strategy of the town, we can find a number of other interpretations, that contributed to build a “kaleidoscopic Genoa” (Musso, 2004), in the words of poets, travellers and singers, in the colours of painters, and in the views of photographers. All these images enrich the daily experience that inhabitants have of their town, and strengthen their association with it.



Figure 16. the Lift at Castelletto



Figure 17. Roofs of Genoa.

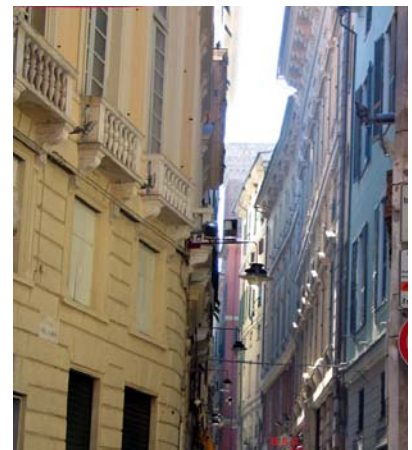


Figure 19. Via del campo.  
F. De André, a famous singer-composer from Genoa, dedicated a song to this street and to the humanity who used to live there.

“... quando mi sarò deciso di andarci, in Paradiso, ci andrò con l’ascensore di Castelletto...”<sup>3</sup>(G. Caproni)

“Mia Genova difesa e proprietaria.  
Ardesia mia. Arenaria.  
[...]  
Genova mia di sasso. Iride. Aria”<sup>4</sup>(G. Caproni)

<sup>2</sup> In several public meetings and conferences, the *Assessore* for Urban Quality and Planning, prof. Bruno Gabrielli, referred to the idea of the ‘beautiful city’ and of the ‘polycentric city’ to explain the vision on which recent renewal policies have been based.



## Cinque Terre: only terraces and ‘sciacchetrà’?

The cultural landscape of Cinque Terre and the history of its growing fame can be considered another example of how heritage interpretation can influence its conservation. This small strip of land, compressed between sea and mountains, at the very end of the oriental side of Liguria, has been inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1997, thanks to its beauty and to the powerful terraced system which has been created over a thousand of years by the populations who still reside there.



Figure 22. Terraced hillsides under Volastra



Figure 23. Area recovered to cultivation by the Park.



Figure 24. Hillside between Corniglia and Volastra. This view is used as a symbol of Cinque Terre.



Figure 25. A small rural building in the vicinity of Schiara.



Figure 26. A steps in a village.

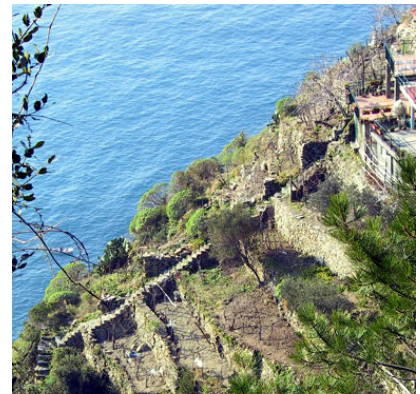


Figure 27. A steep stair towards the sea in Schiara.



Figure 29. Vernazza from above.



Figure 28. New settlements in Riomaggiore.



Figure 30. Urban renovation in Corniglia

Unfortunately, the relevance of this site has been interpreted mainly focussing on the character of the terraced landscape, as testified by the nomination document; while an accurate description of the setting of the villages in relation to the rural territory and of their role in shaping the human settlement is missing. The

<sup>3</sup> “L’ascensore”, from *Il passaggio d’Enea*, in L. Zuliani (ed.), 1999. *Giorgio Caproni. L’opera in versi*. Mondadori, Milano, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> “Stornello”, from “*Il passaggio d’Enea*”, in L. Zuliani (ed.), 1999. *Giorgio Caproni. L’opera in versi*. Mondadori, Milan, p. 171.

planning tool, which has been developed in recent years, has followed this approach and focused on the terraced landscape as the primary cultural resource of the area. Various management tools are foreseen for the rural landscape; on the contrary, the villages have been identified as areas of economic development and no specific indications for improving their conditions have been developed. The consequences of such an approach are already evident: while programmes for the recovery to cultivation of a few hillsides have already been implemented, the villages are undergoing intense construction of major new buildings and replacement of existing buildings, as well as interventions of beautification of public spaces. This trend has worsened the conditions of the villages, some of which had already been heavily transformed in the past decades.

The selective approach described above has influenced also the educational activities carried out by the park. These focus on the terraces, and do not include the villages, thus leading to a defective understanding of this complex and delicate system, where the use of the land and human settlement are closely linked.

*The conservative and interpretive process is a complex issue and cannot be reduced to a sequence of separated activities, from recognition to conservation, and then to interpretation/ presentation. In different ways and degrees, each communication and interpretation programme of the significance of a site is pre-conditioned by more general interpretations of heritage, which are moved by non-disciplinary perspectives.*

### **Political dimension of heritage protection, conservation and interpretation**

Recalling the past has served the ruling classes in more than one occasion to materialize their political designs: this has been necessarily a selective activity that has adapted and reshaped the expressions of culture, from architectural heritage to traditions, to meet the ambitions and goals of politics. After the French Revolution, for instance, a systematic change occurred in the significance of the property expropriated from the noble class and the Church: this patrimony, which represented the power of a privileged group, became the cultural heritage of all Frenchmen.

In Italy, it is possible to identify some interpretations of heritage which can be associated with their contribution to some of the most important historic and political seasons:



*The invention of the Past<sup>5</sup>*: in the second half of the XIX century, during the Unification of the country, architectural heritage underwent a massive 'medievalization'. This occurred through the removal of subsequent facies, mainly Baroque, with the aim of making monuments conform to the "national style" of the glorious epoch of Municipalities<sup>6</sup>.

Figure 31. The Medieval fortified village in Turin designed by A. D'Andrade in 1884. Image taken from <http://www.globalgeografia.com/album/italia/piemonte/torino16.jpg>



*Rome Capital*: the fascist regime found congenial to identify itself with the Roman Empire, and worked for the discovery of important archaeological sites, while being at the same time responsible for the destruction of the medieval neighbourhood of the "Spina di Borgo" to open the Via della Conciliazione.

Figure 32. View of the Via della Conciliazione from the Dome of St. Peter's.

<sup>5</sup> *The Invention of the Past* is the title of a book by G. Zucconi on the Italian season of new-medievalist architecture.

<sup>6</sup> Stylistic restoration had such an important influence on Italian culture of conservation that, even after Second World War, many restoration works resulted in the reconstruction of an assumed medieval stage of the monument.





“Where it was, as it was!”: in the aftermath of Second World War, on the emotional wave caused by the destruction, the integral reconstruction of many monuments was carried out, but many voices raised against falsification of the old and in defence of the new. The first attitude prevailed.

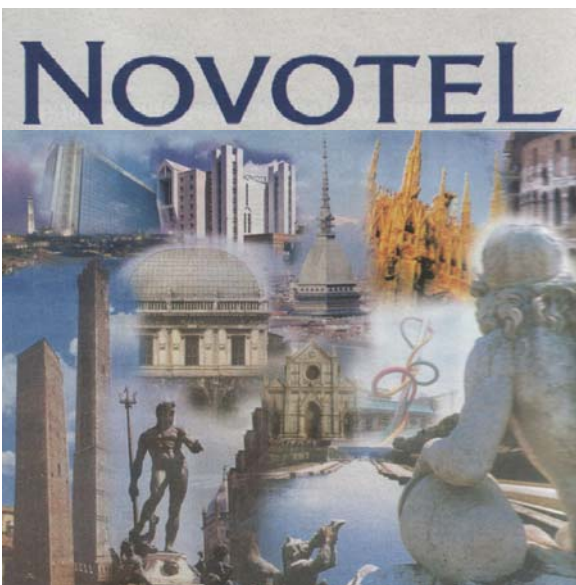
Figure 33. View of the Ponte Santa Trinita, reconstructed after the Second World War.



The *museum-territory*: the Sixties and the Seventies saw the flourishing of social engagement, the rebellion against the culture of the elite and the democratization of cultural heritage, based on a sociological approach to history. This change of perspective coincided with the growing importance of the communist party in the Italian political life. From the things of history and art Italy moved to the notion of cultural property, defined as “testimony with civilization value”<sup>7</sup>.

Figure 34. The shop of the pan-maker.

From the website [http://w2ks03-308.myftp.it/unità\\_museali\\_bottega%20del%20falegname.htm](http://w2ks03-308.myftp.it/unità_museali_bottega%20del%20falegname.htm)



*Heritage, the oil of Italy*: from the Eighties up to now, due to the crisis of traditional productive sectors, the ups and downs of financial markets, the growth of emerging country, cultural heritage has been intended mainly as a resource to be exploited in terms of economic development, and is now meant to be used as a ‘label’ to protect and promote the “made in Italy”, against the increasing expansion of foreign products that imitate the Italian ones.

Figure 35. Advertisement of the renown Novotel chain.

### Legal protection as a form of heritage interpretation

Legal systems for heritage protection are themselves the results of an idea of history which selects the heritage that can confirm its hypothesis (Musso, 1988). They have determined the identity and traced the future of the national heritage and of the ways to transmit them to the future.

<sup>7</sup> This definition has been used in the Declaration I, in “Atti della Commissione d’indagine per la tutela e la valorizzazione del patrimonio storico, archeologico, artistico e del paesaggio” (so-called Franceschini), established by the Law #310/1964.



The former laws for the protection of the “things of historic and artistic interest” and of the “natural beauty” were promulgated in 1939, immediately before the war, and were used only afterwards, in a very different political, historical and economical situation. They were considered rigid, old-fashioned and grounded on a elitist aesthetical vision, but thanks to them it was possible to protect entire urban sectors and portions of landscape, during periods in which transformation pressures were strong.

Difficult implementation of the Italian legal system has favoured a dynamic interpretation in the recognition of cultural property: the missing elaboration of the list of public property has produced a large grey zone of ‘potential heritage’, which, in the perspective of time, has made flexible the system of protection, and contributed to the consciousness of the ongoing evolution of cultural heritage.

The recently approved “Code for the cultural and landscape property”<sup>8</sup> aims at efficiency and consistency, at the clear identification, here and now, of the objects subject to the provisions of law, to have information of what is ‘in’ and what is ‘out’, also in view of the substantial alienation of the public real estate<sup>9</sup>. In its goal of giving certainty, this law interprets stewardship in a economic and technocratic sense, focuses on the construction of a efficient management engine, and risks to lead to a limited and fixed vision of protected heritage. Such an approach is in contrast with the loose nature of this notion, which depends on the values to which it refers. The spreading idea that heritage stewardship can/should be subdivided into separated branches for its most effective implementation (protection, conservation, ‘valorization’ – the ambiguous Italian word used to mean the interpretation, presentation, promotion activity...) has offered the chance to distribute portions of competencies among the state and the local administrations, foreseeing a relevant role for the private sector. The outcomes of such a process cannot be assessed yet, but there is the concrete risk to make inconsistent the administrative framework and to weaken heritage stewardship.

*Legal frameworks for protection represent a background that shapes any activity of conservation or interpretation/ presentation and from which it is not possible to escape. It is then necessary accepting and explicating the limits within which we move, to give disciplinary action its correct perspective and to govern it in respect of the conditions in which we act.*

## **Heritage interpretation and consensus**

The extension and democratisation of the notion of cultural heritage, the increased interest shown by society at large in the future of the relics of the past, and the subsequent engagement of politicians have posed, also in this field, the central issue of consensus. This matter is too complex to be adequately dealt with in few lines, and implies understanding the nature of the links between the role of consensus and power, but it seems useful here to recall some points that call for prudence in considering the search and achievement of consensus as meaningful indicators of the degree and quality of sharing the choices of decision-makers on citizens’ part:

- 1) modern societies are formed by heterogeneous groups, variably permeable and never fixed, in which individuals share interests and values on a limited and temporary base.
- 2) The contemporary world is characterized by the dispersion and hyper-specialization of knowledge, which results in the fragmentation of languages, and in the difficult and uncertain intelligibility of reality.
- 3) The development of information technologies and mass communication has lead to the separation of the content of information from its form of presentation, and tends to transform communication into propaganda.
- 4) The assessment of the relationship between consensus and participation of citizens in the decisional process should consider certain factors, i.e.:
  - The production and pace of the diffusion of fragmented and non hierarchal information;
  - The possibility and quickness in accessing to information;
  - The level of widespread education and the gap between the education of the elites and of the ordinary citizen.

These synthetic notes intend to put in evidence that consensus is not a value in itself, but is qualified in relation to the “what” – that is the object of the decision and the decision itself – to the “how” – that is

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<sup>8</sup> The *Codice dei Beni Culturali e del Paesaggio* has been promulgated on 22nd January 2004.

<sup>9</sup> The recent threats to Italian cultural heritage has been strongly and repeatedly denounced by prof. Salvatore Settis, the dean of the Scuola Normale in Pisa, in several articles on the national newspapers, and in a booklet, titled *Italia S.p.a.*, Einaudi, Turin, 2002. With some other colleagues and collaborators he developed a website, <http://www.patrimoniosos.it>, in which information about the trends in the protection of Italian heritage is provided.

through which steps and with which degree of consciousness consensus has been achieved, and to the 'who' that has been involved in the process. The institutional framework of a country, the relationship foreseen between institutions and citizens, and the values on which is grounded the pact for civil cohabitation are not irrelevant to evaluating consensus and its significance as indicator of real democracy.

It is worth observing, however, that the achievement of consensus on heritage issues may not even be considered as such a positive fact. A certain level of conflict can be an indicator of the still lively link between people and heritage, a link which still touches individual and collective consciences, and of a still existing cultural diversity. On the contrary, stable consensus can hide social homogenization, or the fact that heritage has been reduced from being an interrogating force to just a nice, elegant, reassuring knick-knack put on the shelf of our national 'drawing-room' exposed to be shown to visitors – even if, in fact, we all live in the kitchen, where there is little or no space for that heritage to enter our daily life.

*Finally, there is the real risk that a rhetoric of participation – conceded only in certain and not really strategic areas which are ready to be 'sacrificed' to protect others where to have free hand – and of an oriented consensus take the upper hand to mask the inability and unwillingness to find solution to other crucial issues like poverty reduction, safeguard of human rights and equal distribution of resources.*

### **Heritage(s) and interpretations in the flowing of time**

It is time, in its flowing, that makes change possible: in this flowing humans are modified and modify themselves, the same happens to their values, needs, objectives; in this dimension physical and intangible modifications occur and create 'layers of significance'; it is again in this flowing that we experience change and appreciate its deepness, variety, contradictoriness.

The study of the testimony of the past shows that what has been conserved has been more or less substantially transformed in its materiality, in its functions or in the meanings that people conferred to them. Many objects that today we consider 'monuments' bear witness to the stratification of uses, actions, values, whose modifications have allowed them to be preserved and to reach up to the present day.

It is here sufficient to remind that the Parthenon that had been a pagan temple, a mosque, a powder magazine, a church, before it became a heritage icon in our society of image, or the Pantheon, which escaped destruction thanks to its transformation into a church, or the innumerable convents that, following the repeated suppressions of religious orders, were converted into barracks, schools, or public offices. Even today conservation passes through the search of new functions for the buildings of which we aim at ensuring preservation, though sometimes with opposite results.

History of the construction of cultural heritage is a story with many contradictions, in which tensions and conflicting interest and objectives, live together. Efforts to safeguard tangible and intangible traces of the past, each time for different reasons, have alternated with aspiration to the erasing of memory; sometimes opposing attitudes have lived together.

In France, the post-revolutionary epoch bore witness to several demonstrative destructive acts, but was also the moment in which the modern protection of monuments was founded (Choay, 1995; Arrhenius, 2003). Today we are assisting to an unprecedented enlargement of the heritage family but, at the same time, the recognition/interpretation of our heritage is still a selective activity, at least in its practical consequences.

The involvement of disciplines, formerly almost alien to the study of heritage, such as anthropology, ethnology, or sociology contributed to read with different eyes every product of humanity, while new sciences – like ecology – or complex approaches to old ones contributed to recognize different levels of interconnection among heritage items, and helped read as a system what was before seen as a series of isolated objects. This new approaches show the multiple levels of understanding of our cultural heritage we can achieve by accepting different perspectives, and the multifaceted richness of meanings that a 'monument' can embody.

The changeable fortunes, the succession of memory and oblivion, the conflicts that generate around heritage, or the multifold interpretations contribute to the construction of the depth of cultural heritage. Such a diachronic depth represents perhaps the most important richness of the relics of the past, also to live a contemporaneity, which contains in itself the past and the future.



## Heritage interpretation and education

Over time, heritage has been attributed a growing importance in the harmonic human development. The educational value of heritage poses immediately the question: Which heritage for which education? What is our educational scope and, secondly, how can heritage contribute to achieve our objectives? This issue is not irrelevant, since education, also like heritage, is a battleground where different worldviews clash one against the other. In time and space, these visions have selected what, and built how to study, they have identified whether and which activities could concur to the *bildung* of persons. The risk that a 'prevalent' thought, if not the unique thought, prevail, has not been diminished by integrating cultural heritage in education, in that interpretations of the reality from which they derive can be totally congruent.

On the base of these premises, the delicate relationship between education and heritage interpretation/presentation should be treated, above all if, with heritage interpretation we refer to the autonomous branch of conservation, which has been developed over the last decades, mainly in the Anglo-American world.

Heritage interpretation, in fact, becomes an autonomous sector of conservation practice exactly when cultural industry started its development. This has certain consequences, which are not irrelevant, for the achievement of educational objectives through these specialized practices:

- The more or less declared goals of these practices have prevalently been of an economic kind, the improvement of cultural properties points first to increase the number of visitors of cultural sites, and second, to qualify the experience, in order to maintain the same level of interest in visitors and to grant additional funds to site management, due also to public budget limitations;
- Monitoring and adjustment of cultural property and interpretive programmes risk to responding to criteria too similar to "customer is always right", thus subordinating educational goals to the economic ones;
- The involvement of local communities in interpretation and presentation programmes for the site they live in, on the one hand, aims at creating a climate of public participation, on the other, risks to break the intimate relationship between those communities and their heritage, transforming them into a museum of themselves (Lowenthal, 1999).

To the perplexities expressed above, further interrogatives can be pointed out as additional elements of reflection:

- Is it possible to overcome the inadequacies of our educational systems only through developing special programmes of presentation of our cultural heritage?
- Or, it is not more probable that a general lowering of the quality in education will diminish the chances for citizens to achieve the necessary intellectual tools to understand the issues posed by heritage and heritage interpretation, and to participate in any decisional process, including those related to heritage?
- With such premises, who – and how – will be in the conditions of keeping watch on those responsible for the safeguard of the relics of the past?

*It seems therefore important to ask ourselves whether pushing for a more solid and plural education be not the heritage experts' and decisions makers' first responsibility to ensure an autonomous comprehension of heritage by citizens, beyond focussing the attention on the improvement of the quality of communication and presentation programmes for heritage sites.*

### (Not) to conclude

What exposed in the previous lines, put in evidence that interpretation has played and continues to play a fundamental role in the construction of our cultural heritage, and that is perhaps useful to offer some keys in understanding this process also to non-experts. Heritage interpretation, then, could help also to comprehend the ways in which heritage itself has been 'interpreted' over time, which were the historic and economic reasons that allow certain views to prevail, beyond the development of specific ethical and technical principles, or of dedicated protocols and technologies for heritage presentation/communication programmes.

The economic and technical approach that spread in the field of conservation has led to the fragmentation of this discipline and to the multiplication of specialties, each with their own and separate objectives. This approach has not been able, however, to find a way to overcome – or to integrate in a useful manner – the contradictions rooted in our relationship with the past.

Heritage interpretation suffers these limits too, and risks to have damaging effects on its own object, its image and meanings, even if it does not directly act on the physicality of heritage artifacts.

The role of heritage interpretation needs perhaps to be rethought, possibly starting from non disciplinary interpretations, such as those provided by painters, writers, poets, singers or film-makers. Reading a monument or a place through the eyes of artists – individuals who have the ability to interpret universal feelings through the expressions of their own – would offer maybe a fragmentary image of a place, like in a kaleidoscope or in a cubist painting, in which things cannot be recognized for their external aspect but are caught in their essence. Such an effort could help conservation experts, decision-makers and, above all, society at large to recognize the reasons for which we have conserved/transformed the relics of the past and to find new ones for the future, would perhaps contribute to get conservation out of its technical disciplinary enclosures and to reconnect it to a human dimension, where heritage can find a function that generates sense for human beings.

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