

la rivista di **en**gramma
febbraio **2021**

179

Borders Cuts Images

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Borders Cuts Images

edited by

Linda Bertelli and Maria Luisa Catoni



edizioni**gramma**

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La Rivista di Engramma

a peer-reviewed journal

179 febbraio 2021

www.egramma.it

sede legale

Engramma
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redazione

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edizioni**engramma**

ISBN carta 978-88-31494-52-6

ISBN digitale 978-88-31494-53-3

finito di stampare aprile 2021

L'editore dichiara di avere posto in essere le
dovute attività di ricerca delle titolarità dei diritti
sui contenuti qui pubblicati e di aver impegnato
ogni ragionevole sforzo per tale finalità, come
richiesto dalla prassi e dalle normative di settore.

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Borders Cuts Images. History and Theory

Engramma n. 179 Editorial

Linda Bertelli, Maria Luisa Catoni*

The cover image we have chosen for this issue of Engramma was shot by photographer Laura Lezza:

“Una fotografia realizzata nei primissimi giorni della pandemia, quando si stava formando una nuova estetica, nuovi spazi, un nuovo sguardo e nuovi perimetri. Sono dunque contenta che quei primi segni con lo scotch su un pavimento possano dare un seppur piccolo contributo visivo alla vostra riflessione sul tema dei confini, dei tagli, delle immagini” (Laura Lezza, personal correspondence, 16/02/2021).

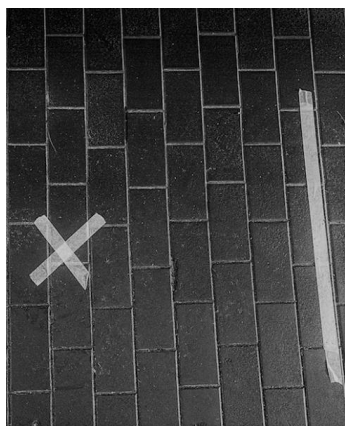


Foto di Laura Lezza | Photo by Laura Lezza

Even a cursory glance at artistic practices and techniques, as well as aesthetic reflections on them, cannot fail to notice that the notion of cut in its different meanings and valences is a constant and recurring element. From case to case, it corresponds not only to gestures of rupture, experimentation, and new codifications, but also to ordinary, but no less powerful, working tools and devices. It therefore seemed to us that practices of cutting and theoretical analyses of them, as they involve the human and social sciences, required special attention. Indeed, such practices and analyses represent an opportunity to identify some of the vital ganglia of a large number of artistic practices and media processes while at the same time opening up new ramifications of research and allowing us to look at classical problems in a new way or identify new objects and spaces of analysis. Scrutinized in a historical perspective in terms of the way it is practiced and interpreted, we consider the cut to be, in extreme synthesis, one of the most relevant

conceptual and technical operators. As a first step, therefore, we have dedicated an international Winter School to the plethora of topics that rotate around the notion of cut. Organizing this school in November 2019 as part of the Research Unit “LYNX. Center for the Interdisciplinary Analysis of Images” at the IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca, we invited scholars to delve into the multiple aspects involved in the notion of cut, the various practices that use it, the tools that concretize it, and the different historical moments and cases in which it has become particularly evident. The analyses presented and discussed during the Winter School have thus provided an opportunity to begin fine-tuning our understanding of the meanings of cutting practices, both in theoretical and historical terms and in terms of artistic and media techniques, generating further questions and reflections that are still to investigate and leading to the further scrutiny proposed in this issue of “Engramma”.

The essays collected here reflect on some of the multiple areas of intersection between different ways of approaching the notion of cut: this is, of course, still a partial picture that we hope might serve as a point of departure. It is composed of specific case studies shedding light on the many aspects, complexity and wealth of ramifications produced by the notion of cut as a recurring exercise in modeling. The cut thus emerges in its many and various functions, incarnations and statutes: as an obligatory instrument of analysis and representation; as a means of production identifying an artistic genre; as an operator to visually affirm an awareness of the power of art-making processes; as a method of rupture and innovation, each time producing new approaches to the primary elements of artistic making (matter, space, forms), new affirmations of the artist’s status, and new forms of mediation and re-mediation. The research question from which we began was not so much if and how much of avant-garde there still is in the cut, although we are aware of the relevance of this aspect. Indeed, in constructing this issue we have taken into account the premise that the cut seems to take on an emblematic role in the avant-garde, and even ends up becoming the image of a way of accessing visibility. For instance, this occurs in the well-known sequence of the cut of the eye in Buñuel’s *Un Chien Andalou*, a work that condenses a metaphor of art in the violence of the blade that rescues, and therefore subverts, the very condition of seeing. However, the core interest that gradually

emerged from the discussions carried out first during the Winter School at the IMT School and then during preparatory work for this issue of "Engramma" concentrated instead on the elements of the ordinariness of the cut as an artistic and media practice. To analyze these elements, we have not proceeded by reconstructing an (art) history of the cut, strictly speaking. In other words, what we intend to do with this issue of "Engramma" is not to formulate a homogeneous and exhaustive chronological framework of the different operations involving the cut in its different versions and applications, in the humanities and social sciences. Rather, in a broader sense (which does not, of course, deny or neglect what a multi- and interdisciplinary history of cutting practices should or could be) what we hold up as a distinctive aspect of this collection of essays is the act of taking charge of the very dimension of history or, more precisely, of some of its moments and their intelligibility when read through the notion of cut, taken as much as a practice as an operator of analysis and methodological tool. From this particular point of view, interrogating specific histories of cuts is tantamount to interrogating the event (its analysis and understanding) as a cut or an effect of the cut.

Characterizing the cut as a multifaceted figure (concept, analytical and methodological tool, artistic practice, and media modality, to mention only the elements most recurrent in our collection) makes it possible to read each contribution in this volume as a focus on a single facet of the figure of the cut, one facet that necessarily recalls and presupposes the others. Considered in its entirety, therefore, the volume intends to establish links and points of resonance between case studies that may appear very distant and distinct from each other, even while recognizing that this does not exhaust all the faces of the figure of the cut. It is thus clear that the gesture of cutting must be thought of in its characteristic of not belonging either to the sole list of concepts or to the simple plan of an action positioned exclusively in the sphere of empirical art and media-making processes. That is, it should not be considered an execution that requires no further questioning, being sufficient to itself and finding in itself its own justification. Here, the cut is instead analyzed as a theoretical-practical complex.

Concerning its execution, we can assume an attitude of distance and detachment; we can move away from it in order to focus on it, identifying

those traits that allow us to constitute it as a concept and methodological and analytical tool through which to investigate the objects of our research. It is a concept that operates, however, and as such it must be considered first and foremost as an operator in a given context (including material contexts). It is necessary to describe the multiple forms in which the cut is carried out, the conditions in which it takes place, the meanings it intends to communicate, the style with which it is performed and, last but not least, what it seeks to bring to light. No theory can plan, or anticipate, this event in its scope of operational gesture. The article by Maria Luisa Catoni, who is also co-editor of the issue, analyzes this character of the cut as a 'device' by focusing on what is perhaps one of the most relevant figures incorporating the cut, that is, the frame or, more specifically, the border, and conducting a comparative study of the different and ambiguous ways this figure operates and its communicative potentialities (including meta-artistic). Catoni explores this topic by studying first the very famous case of the *Portrait of a Carthusian* by Petrus Christus and then four attic red figure wine cups from the 6th and 5th century BCE. The hybrid instrument of the frame, by now a classic topos in investigations into the techniques and dynamics of the cut (Ferrari and Pinotti 2018, to cite a recent publication), is also the subject of Maja-Lisa Müller's essay. Focusing on a certainly non-traditional medium such as wood inlay between the 15th and 16th centuries, she analytically browses several examples of the kinds of transgression that this divisive and defining element allows and, at the same time, limits. By paying attention to the immediate effects of the gesture of cutting and above all what is entailed in its execution, we can say that this act always involves determining the edges of what was previously united: the separation introduced by the cut is also, always, delimitation. In this sense, the cut delimits and determines. It draws separating lines that grant form to what previously had none. It could also be argued that cutting involves a process of individuation from which the work is generated, since division is the generator of form and sense. Every operation aimed at creating separation, division, delimitation may thus imply, in some cases, the reconfiguration of what was indistinct (as well as the margin and what is excluded) through a transition, from indistinct to distinct, from external to internal, with all the variety of illusionistic games and levels of ambiguity that such a transition not only tolerates but also contributes to creating. In artistic practices, the cut also corresponds to carve material surfaces that

will take shape, thus making itself visible. Form-taking is also an exit from obscurity, a process of becoming perceptible and being identified as separate. This process concerns not only the various media (whether artistic or not) understood as practices of image production, but also a much more comprehensive range of elements including both the ways in which we perceive and receive these images as well as the cultural, social and economic dynamics through which these images circulate and are (or are not) conserved, managed and archived.

The essay by Costanza Caraffa and the one by Laura Forti and Francesca Leonardi deal more specifically with this last aspect, albeit on the basis of two different cases and using different methodologies. Caraffa's essay concentrates in particular on the remarkable archive of the Photo Library of the Kunsthistorisches Institute-Max Planck Institute in Florence, a photo library of which she has been the director since 2006. She offers a detailed, theoretically oriented and careful overview of the different practices involving cutting operations in the organization and management of a photographic archive designed for documentation and art-historical research, and the multiple meanings, both historical and theoretical, that these operations can assume. Forti and Leonardi's article addresses the relationship between cut and space, a topic also mentioned by Caraffa. It makes this relationship the central theme of inquiry, however, analyzing it through the case of project space as one of the organizational typologies of the contemporary art system. The essay studies project space both in terms of its morphology, setting out to identify and define this structure, and in terms of the relationships each individual space has with other spaces of the same type, read through network analysis and focusing on the Milanese context. If we consider the relationship between space and cut, especially from a cognitive point of view, perception offers a unique condensation point. Indeed, the condition of possibility of perception is located in the rhythmic interruption of the sensory continuum, just as the very act of blinking marks the rhythm of perception.

When analyzed in terms of its link to perception, the cut seems to function as that which establishes the possibility of relating to the perceived and its meanings. The cut gives order and direction to what we perceive, determining the contours of objects and allowing edges and borders to

delineate what remains excluded from that which is perceived. The essay by Linda Bertelli (co-editor of the collection together with Maria Luisa Catoni) follows this line of interpretation, offering a detailed and historically circumstantiated study of selected pages from a fundamental text by the well-known French physiologist Etienne-Jules Marey, *Le Mouvement* (1894). In this particular text, Marey outlines what he sees as the potential function that chronophotography, as a photographic technique designed to represent the selection and re-composition of bodily movement in the scientific field, could play if it were practiced at the service of artists. As an operation of separation but also composition and re-composition, the cut has always been linked both to the operations of drawing and defining the contours, and to those of editing (Marey's research also proceeded in this vein) which, considered in their interrelation, establish the play of the inside and outside of the image. Camilla Pietrabissa's essay is mainly dedicated to analyzing this aspect, focusing on the different types of cuts to which the technique of drawing has been subjected historically. By selecting specific examples and considering the period between the 16th and 18th centuries, Pietrabissa identifies the gesture of the cut as involving a tool used for both analysis and preservation over time. Studying this tool, we can conduct a historical investigation of the effect of interpretation this selective practice has had on the image as well as the role it has played in classifying both represented subjects and artistic genres.

It cannot be stressed enough that these cutting operations are inextricably linked to the history of media and processes of remediation as a history, first and foremost, of techniques and technologies (and, therefore, the inseparability of a history of technique and technology from understandings of cutting practices). The analysis of these relationships lies at the center of Sara Romani's essay dedicated to the work of Swiss photographer and lithographer Carl Durheim (1810-1890). By studying the relationship between graphics and photography in the mid-19th century through the lens of some of Durheim's images, Romani investigates the operation of the cut understood as framing and selecting. The meanings of this operation, and therefore its impact on the interpretation of these photographs, are analyzed through a contextual study focused mainly on charting the circulation of these images over time.

In general terms, the same lines of Western thought that have taken processes of image production, reception and circulation as their chosen object of study (from the history of art to aesthetics and visual studies) have also evolved through an examination of the ways in which concepts and techniques are intertwined, substantiating themselves in the above-mentioned notions of style, composition, detail, montage, interval, frame, selection, framing, inclusion and exclusion; these notions form the lemmas of a vocabulary whose recto and verso are knowledge and practice. Thanks to this vocabulary, a long history of media practices and, on the reflexive level, the formulation of aesthetic and social hypotheses, has been able to constitute itself as a discourse. The essays by Agnese Ghezzi and Laura di Fede focus in particular on these aspects. Ghezzi's essay, moving through the history of anthropology in late 19th-century Italy and referring to both textual and iconographic sources, analyzes the historical construction of the ethnographer's gaze and the role that guidebooks and travel manuals played in defining of this practice of observation. Such texts served to give instructions for the reliability and, therefore, the objectivity of information collection, including information obtained through photographic documentation. The construction of ethnographic observation at the end of the 19th century is thus linked to the use of photography as a technology possessed of hybrid meanings and always occupying the borderline between art and science. Di Fede's article also returns to the cultural and social history of the "techniques of the observer" (Crary 1990), choosing as its specific field of investigation the photographic representation of Sicily by foreign travelers in the second half of the 19th century. The author lays out an intermedia comparison with the engravings and drawings of the previous century in terms of framing, styles and dynamics of the gaze. In the complex of discourses on the arts and their praxis, the cut thus constitutes one of the essential tools of a visual argumentation that implies both the action of the one using cutting to produce a new form of the visible and of the one receiving it. As we have seen, this two-fold access is particularly evident in the example of how elements such as framing, delimiting, and editing operate. Such elements play a powerful role in organizing the visual, as they are able to guide and position the attention of the viewer by directing it towards specific loci of the image. We also analyze this role with regard to the status and scope of norms designed to regulate access to the visible, to what is or is not considered permissible to look at (Baer, et al. 2019).

Although this theme emerges in many of the essays collected here (e.g., Catoni, Caraffa, and Ghezzi, among others), we have selected two additional, specific examples that point to an inquiry about the process of defining the conditions of what can be shown. The first is one of the most relevant examples through which such conditions can be analyzed, since it investigates the process of institutionalization: the film censorship carried out at the ministerial level in Italy since 1913 (and subjected to a radical reform that substantially eliminated it in 2017), the subject of Maria Giusti's insightful paper employing a legal perspective. The second example—Sonia Colavita's essay—reflects on the historical stratification of the dynamics of visibility, exploring how they unfold in the decomposition of the matter of which each image is composed. Focusing on the practices of found footage experimental cinema and, more specifically, Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002), the essay shows how not even the person producing the image can exercise full control over what is framed and its meaning. Such control is impossible because the cut gives shape to an excess that escapes compositional choice and leaks, filtering into the image itself. In this sense, cut practices are located in a plexus in which control, style, technique, habitus, cultural filters, norms and prohibitions converge. From this perspective, the gesture of cutting also points us toward an analysis of the processes of interdiction of images and, conversely, freedom to images, an issue that still represents a delicate and challenging aspect of media practices in their relationship with historical, cultural and political terrain.

*The authors assume equal responsibility for the conceptual, scientific, and editorial aspects of the essay. Paragraphs 1, 3, 4 and 8 are edited by Maria Luisa Catoni; paragraphs 2, 5, 6, 7 and 9 are edited by Linda Bertelli. The editors would like to thank Angelina Zontine for the accurate proofreading.

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English abstract

This issue analyzes the different practices, uses and meaning of the cut in the humanities and social sciences. Through a careful selection of specific case studies and methodological perspectives, this collection of essays intends to offer an overview of some of the multiple areas of intersection between different ways of approaching the notion of cut: as a tool of analysis and representation, as a means of production identifying an artistic genre, as an operator to visually affirm an awareness of the power of art-making processes, and as a method of rupture and innovation, each time producing new approaches to the primary elements of artistic making (matter, space, forms), new affirmations of the artist's status, and new forms of mediation and re-mediation. It includes contributions by Maria Luisa Catoni, Camilla Pietrabissa, Maja-Lisa Müller, Costanza Caraffa, Sara Romani, Laura Di Fede, Agnese Ghezzi, Linda Bertelli, Sonia Colavita, Maria Giusti, Laura Forti and Francesca Leonardi.

keywords | cut; borders; image; art history; visual studies; aesthetics



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Maria Luisa Catoni

Cutting down the interpretation of drawings

Camilla Pietrabissa

Framing representation

Maja-Lisa Müller

The photographic cut and cutting practices in photographic archives

Costanza Caraffa

**From cuts to clues, hidden narratives within the details
of Carl Durheim's photographic portraits**

Sara Romani

A look from outside

Laura Di Fedè

Framing the 'delegated gaze'

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Chronophotography as an archive

Linda Bertelli

The aesthetics of cut in found footage film

Sonia Colavita

**Rediscovering censorship to understand the struggle for
the contemporaneous age-oriented movie rating system**

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At the border of artistic legitimation

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