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Claustrophobic Visions of the Asylum: The Photobooks of the Italian Psychiatric Reform

Alvise Sforza Tarabochia

Abstract

In this article, I compare the strategies of visual representation employed in the two photobooks of 1969 *Gli esclusi* (D'Alessandro-Piro 1969) and *Morire di classe* (Berengo Gardin et al. 1969). These photobooks have been the photographic protagonists of the reform of psychiatric health care that, fed by the upheavals of the late 1960s, brought about the closure of psychiatric asylums in 1978 – through the famous Law 180. I will focus in particular on the representation of claustrophobic spaces in its relationship with the bodies of the inmates and how this relates to the traditional iconography of madness. The aim of this article is to show that, even though they employ radically different strategies of representation, these photobooks aim at translating into visual terms the pivotal philosophical coordinates that guided the reform of psychiatric health care.

Keywords

Photobook, asylum, psychiatry, photojournalism, Italy, madness, iconography.

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Introduction

In this article, I compare the strategies of visual representation employed in the two photobooks of 1969 *Gli esclusi. Fotoreportage da un'istituzione totale* (D'Alessandro-Piro 1969) and *Morire di classe. La condizione manicomiale fotografata da Carla Cerati e Gianni Berengo Gardin* (Berengo Gardin et al. 1969).¹ These photobooks have been the photographic protagonists of the reform of psychiatric health care that, fed by the upheavals of the late 1960s, brought about the closure of psychiatric asylums in 1978 – through the famous Law 180. I will focus in particular on the representation of claustrophobic spaces, its relationship with the bodies of the inmates and how these relate to the traditional iconography of madness. The aim of this article is to show

¹ Both *Gli esclusi* and *Morire di classe* are now highly valued collectible photobooks with scarce availability. A scanned version of *Gli esclusi* can be accessed via Webarhive at <https://web.archive.org/web/20090207170253/http://www.lucianodalesandro.com/esclusi/prespiro.html> (last accessed 1/5/2021). *Morire di classe* can be retrieved in anastatic reproduction edited by Agenzia sociale Duemilauno at <https://www.2001agsoc.it/materiale/sconfinamenti/Sconfinamenti.N14.pdf> (last accessed 1/5/2021). Neither *Gli esclusi*, nor *Morire di classe* have page numbers. To facilitate referencing I have employed the following page numbering: in *Gli esclusi* the first page with a picture is page 1, numbering follows continuously; in *Morire di classe* title page is number 1, the original introduction begins at page 2 and ends at page 5, numbering then follows continuously.

that, even though they employ radically different strategies of representation, these photobooks aim at translating into visual terms the pivotal philosophical coordinates that guided the reform of psychiatric health care. I also aim at showing that in order to do so they both engage with the traditional iconography of madness, either by exploiting it or subverting it. In this article, I build on two of my preceding works (Sforza Tarabochia 2018; 2019), to which I refer the reader for a more comprehensive contextualisation of *Gli esclusi* and *Morire di classe* and also for a wider review of existing scholarship on the subject. In my previous articles, I draw more wide-ranging conclusions on each of the two photobooks, relating them to the history of visual culture and more specifically to the 'phototext' and analysing the relationship between images and textual apparatuses. For reasons of space constraint, in the present article I will limit my analysis to a comparison of the visual strategies employed by the photographers vis à vis the militant stances of the reformist psychiatrists who commissioned their work.

Contextual Note and Brief Review of Existing Literature

Gli esclusi. Fotoreportage da un'istituzione totale is a photobook that contains 98 photos by Luciano D'Alessandro (1933-2016), a famous Neapolitan photoreporter and photojournalist who worked with major Italian and international magazines and newspapers such as *Corriere della sera*, *Europeo*, *Life*, *Le Monde*, *Stern*, and so on. The photos in *Gli esclusi* are the result of a work of photoreportage carried out in the *Materdomini* psychiatric institution in Nocera Superiore between 1965 and 1967. The work was commissioned by Sergio Piro, phenomenological and reformist psychiatrist, as part of his anti-institutional strategy, similarly to what Basaglia was doing in Gorizia with Berengo Gardin and Cerati for *Morire di classe*. *Gli esclusi* was published by Il Diaframma in 1969 some weeks after Piro had been fired because of his reformist ideas.

Morire di classe. La condizione manicomiale fotografata da Carla Cerati e Gianni Berengo Gardin, published by Einaudi in 1969, collects photos

taken by Carla Cerati and Gianni Berengo Gardin in the asylums of Gorizia, Colorno, Florence and Ferrara. The photoreportages had been commissioned by Franco Basaglia and Franca Ongaro with the overt intention of creating an “anti-institutional” photobook.

For the purpose of this comparative analysis suffice it to mention that in terms of scholarly work D’Alessandro’s *Gli esclusi* has so far been overshadowed by *Morire di classe* and received limited scholarly attention. *Gli esclusi* was well-received by critics at the time (see e.g. Grassi 1969 and Stefanile 1969). According to Cesareo, “le immagini elaborate da Luciano D’Alessandro [...] sono strumenti di indagine dell’istituzione, strumenti di denuncia e di analisi, di mobilitazione e di lotta” (Cesareo 1981: 29).

Several scholars have mentioned *Gli esclusi* in passing but no one to date has highlighted the individuality of D’Alessandro’s photography: all scholars who mention *Gli esclusi* count it together with *Morire di classe* as one of the two photobooks of the reform.

Manzoli maintains that D’Alessandro, and other photographers, such as Berengo Gardin and Cerati, “entrano negli ospedali psichiatrici per documentarne l’orrore” (Manzoli 2004: 4). Schinaia sees in *Gli esclusi* the shift from the “non detto o [...] dire scandalistico” of the previous (rare) reportages on asylums, to the “tentativo di raccontare delle storie e di avvicinare emotivamente l’altro” (Schinaia 2004: 467); D’Autilia considers both *Gli esclusi* and *Morire di classe* as the initiators of the trend “estetico-emotivo” of the representation of psychiatric matters in Italian photojournalism (D’Autilia 2012: 342), which, according to Schinaia derives from “chiamare come testimoni dell’esistenza manicomiale fotografi [...] che [...] avrebbero potuto “costruire” immagini ad alta risonanza emotiva” (Schinaia 2004: 467). According to Russo, *Gli esclusi* and *Morire di classe* are the first Italian “fotoreportage umanitar[i]” of the 1960s–1970s (Russo 2011: 314). Babini includes *Gli esclusi* and *Morire di classe* in her history of Italian asylums (Babini 2009: 252–54). Carli maintains that “se la denuncia dell’istituzione totale è uno dei tratti caratterizzanti de *Gli esclusi*, la necessità della sua abolizione costituisce il leit motif di *Morire di classe*” (Carli 2014: 107). The only two substantive contributions in English on *Morire di classe* (Foot 2015 and Forgacs 2014)

move criticisms I do not share to the photobook, while at the same time they mention *Gli esclusi* in passing and somewhat implicitly extend their criticisms to it.

While *Gli esclusi* might have been slightly overlooked by scholars, many maintain that *Morire di classe* actively contributed to the reform of psychiatric health care of 1978, to different extents and in different ways (see for instance: Ongaro 1998; Pitrelli 2004; Manzoli 2004; Giannichedda 2005; Curti 2013). This is the main focus of Foot's criticism. While Foot recognises *Morire di classe* as co-initiator with *Gli esclusi* of the wave of "asylum photography" (Foot 2015: 29–30), he also maintains that its influence cannot be measured and, if anything, it has to be debunked, since the photobook only sold approximately 11,000 copies and went out of print in the early 1980s (Foot 2015: 28). Additionally, some of the photos in *Morire di classe* were taken in Gorizia, where, by the late 1960s some change was already in progress thanks to Basaglia's reformist work. For this reason, Foot claims that the fact that inmates are represented in a "passive state, a state from which many had escaped", to a certain extent re-victimises them "in order to serve the needs of the movement" (Foot 2015: 24). According to Forgacs, photography has a very limited "capacity to record any kind of complex social information" (Forgacs 2014: 233) and photos such as those in *Gli esclusi* or *Morire di classe*, are taken by photographers "from the outside [who are] perhaps inevitably, intrusive" (Forgacs 2014: 239). Ultimately, such images "reproduce the condition of the mentally ill person as the object of an outsider's curiosity. [...] The camera, and consequently the viewer, peers into their 'habitat' through a fence" (Forgacs 2014: 232).

Gli Esclusi

An initial selection of 21 of D'Alessandro's photos was published in 1967, in the 117th issue of *Popular Photography Italiana*, under the title "Il mondo degli esclusi" (D'Alessandro 1967). The images were accompanied by a short presentation by D'Alessandro and by an article by Piro, entitled "Fotografia e alienità" (Piro 1967). This first selection explores, according to the photographer D'Alessandro, the "solitudine

del malato mentale, rispetto al suo mondo di provenienza, rispetto agli altri, una solitudine che nasce dalla malattia” (D’Alessandro 1967: 54). This premise draws him close to what was Basaglia’s position in his first writings, the ones that he published before the traumatic experience of his first entrance in the asylum of Gorizia as its director. Basaglia then considered mental illness as a “rimpicciolimento” of the existential structure of the subject (Basaglia 2017a):

Rimpicciolimento dell’“esserci” significa restringimento delle possibilità esistenziali verso una possibilità esistenziale ben determinata, non più dotata di libere possibilità ma dettata dal mondo (Basaglia 2017a: 57).

D’Alessandro’s photos indeed seem to focus on shrunk subjects, who do not entertain any relationship with each other. They focus on hands, on silent gestures that do not express any reciprocity. In the article that accompanies D’Alessandro’s photos, Piro highlights this aspect and maintains that “le mani [sono] un fatto importante spiritualmente perché permettono di manipolare il mondo [...] le mani dell’uomo che vive la sua alienità sono mani abbandonate, inerti, contratte, violentemente aduncate [...] esse parlano, nel loro modo occulto, il linguaggio della solitudine, dell’isolamento, dell’abbandono, dell’impotenza a vivere [...] della resa totale” (Piro 1967: 88). What is more, in the photos there is no recognition of the institutional context, the spaces are completely absent from the representation, which concentrates on the individual, shrunk, existences.

Two years later, D’Alessandro releases *Gli esclusi*, whose subtitle, not by chance, now refers to Goffman. *Gli esclusi* is a *Fotoreportage da un’istituzione totale*, the asylum is defined as a total institution: “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (Goffman 1961: xiii). *Gli esclusi* offers a wider selection of images – 98

rather than 21, in the format of a photobook:² save for Piro's introduction, there is no textual apparatus.

The photos are charged with a much clearer political meaning, perhaps also thanks to Sergio Piro's preface, which frames them quite differently to "Il mondo degli esclusi". "Il vuoto è stato pienamente colto nelle immagini", writes Piro, "ma questo non è il vuoto della malattia come ineluttabile condanna biologica, è invece il vuoto che l'apatia, l'inerzia e l'abbandono hanno creato in coloro che sono esclusi da qualunque movimento e da qualunque dinamica" (Piro 1969: no page numbers). This is an institutional violence: "Se già lo spazio dell'uomo era ristretto dalla sua alienità, esso viene ulteriormente ristretto dalla violenza e dall'abbandono" (Piro 1969: no page numbers). In 1969, the devastating effect that internment in the asylum had on psychiatric patients had already been acknowledged and it had a name. Burton called it "institutional neurosis", whereas Basaglia called it "istituzionalizzazione", and defined it as a "comportamento legato al processo di 'rimpicciolimento' dell'io cui il malato mentale è sottoposto dal momento del suo ingresso nell'asilo", which creates "un complesso sindromico che spesso può venir confuso coi sintomi della malattia stessa: inibizioni, apatia, perdita di iniziativa, di interessi, ecc." (Basaglia 2017b: 271). The "rimpicciolimento" that Basaglia described as an effect of mental illness in his early writings is now recognised as an effect of the institution itself, that "shrinks" the subject's existence.

These considerations translate into the visual grammar in D'Alessandro's photos in a way that we might consider unexpected. In *Gli esclusi*, much like what he had already done in "Il mondo degli esclusi", D'Alessandro omits almost entirely the spatial and institutional context. The approach remains the intimate approach of "Il mondo degli esclusi", that drew on artistic and portrait photography. All pictures,

² I refer the reader to Badger's and Parr's introduction to their *Photobook. A History*, vol. 1 (2004) and to the more recent *Photobook. L'immagine di un'immagine* by Bordini (2020) for comprehensive definitions of the term 'photobook' and studies of this form of art.

apart from the two “establishing shots” of the male and female ward courtyards, are individual or small group portraits. The 27 images that are not portraits are details of hands. Differently from *Morire di classe*, which I will discuss shortly, there is no textual component to caption the pictures, apart from Piro’s preface of course. It is therefore neither in a direct message nor in establishing a relationship between the body of the inmate and the space or the means of physical constraint that D’Alessandro expresses the “existential shrinking” that the institution imposes. On the contrary, in applying an intimistic style reminiscent of the first photographic neorealism, D’Alessandro focuses on expressions, gestures of the hands and the posture of bodies. The eyes of the subjects are slightly more varied. Some look towards the lens (e.g. pp. 4, 26, 27, 37), some lean their head (e.g. pp. 7, 23), others have a distracted gaze (e.g. pp. 36, 73) or are simply looking at something beyond the frame (e.g. pp. 73, 92). Posture is less varied: when hands and gestures are not the protagonists of the picture, the subjects are portrayed with crossed arms or hands concealed between the legs. They are sitting, laying, crouched (e.g. pp. 6-7, 64, 77, 86-87) (Figure 1).

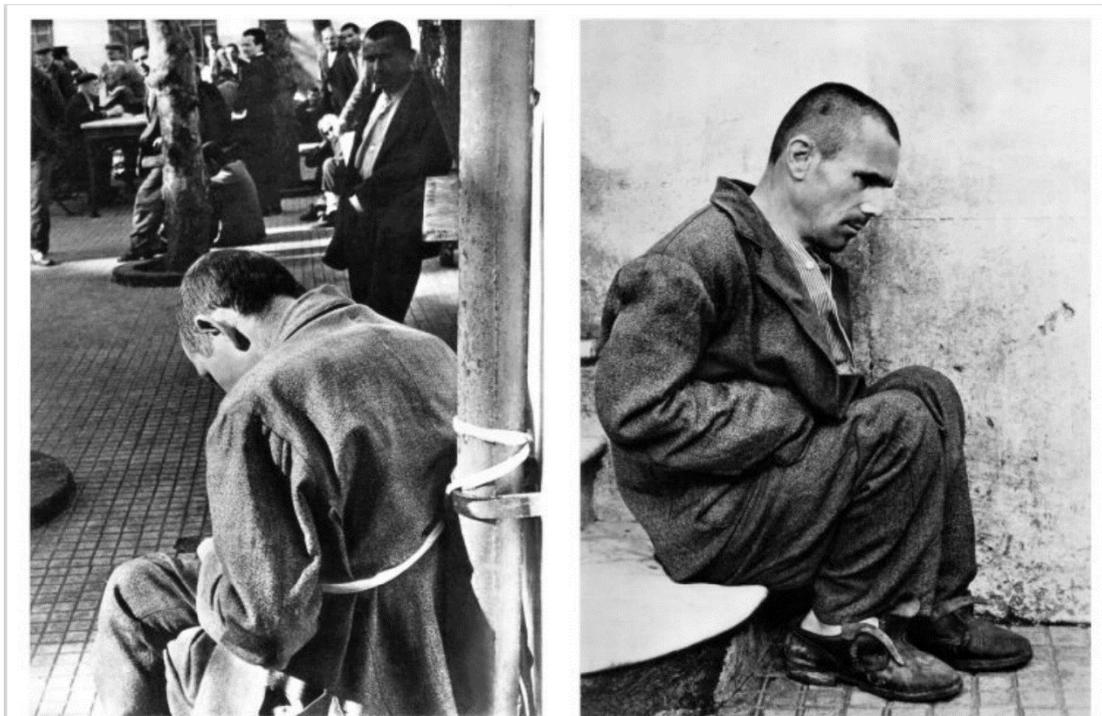


Figure 1 Luciano D’Alessandro, two pages from *Gli esclusi*, pp. 6 and 7. Attribution TBC.

Their gestures and posture recall the traditional iconography of melancholy. The print *Melancholia I* by Dürer (1514), for instance, personifies melancholy as an angelic woman, sitting in the position of the thinker, her head leaning on the hand, gazing towards the emptiness beyond the frame. In his book of emblems, the *Iconologia*, Cesare Ripa describes melancholy as:

Donna, mesta, e dogliosa, di brutti panni vestita, senza alcuno ornamento, starà a sedere sopra un sasso, co' gomiti posati sopra i ginocchi, e ambe le mani sotto 'l mento, e vi sarà a canto un albero senza fronde, e frà i sassi. Fa la Malinconia nell'uomo, (il quale è un ritratto di tutto 'l Mondo) quegli effetti istessi, che fà la forza del Verno ne gli alberi, e nelle piante, le quali, agitate da diversi venti, tormentate dal freddo, e ricoperti dalle nevi, appariscono secchi, sterili, nude, e di vilissimo prezzo, però non è alcuno, che non fugga, come cosa dispiacevole la conversatione de gli uomini malinconici. Vanno essi co'l pensiero sempre nelle cose difficili, e quei rischi cattivi, li quali sarebbe mera, e somma disgratia se avvenissero, essi se li fingono presenti, e reali, il che mostrano i segni della mestizia, e del dolore. È mal vestita, senza ornamento (Ripa 1645: 384) (Figure 2).



Figure 2 *Malinconia* from Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, p. 384. Woodcut, Public Domain.

Finally, we could think of the 1610 painting *An Allegory of Joy and Melancholy* by Abraham Janssens van Nuyssen, which portrays a bacchic and young personification of joy in the foreground with an old woman in the background. The old woman, who personifies melancholy, is crouched, in the position of the thinker, crossed arms, head leaning on one of the hands, gazing into the void.

Traditional iconography of melancholy often overlaps with that of acedia or idleness: the melancholic person (in iconography most commonly a woman) is often acedious and idle. Ripa, in the *Iconologia*, describes acedia as a “*donna vecchia, brutta, mal vestita che stia a sedere et che tenghi la guancia appoggiata sopra alla sinistra mano [...] et il gomito di detta mano sia posato sopra il ginocchio, tenendo il capo chino*” (Ripa 1645: 6): all of these are characteristics that overlap with his representation of melancholy (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Accidia from Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, p. 6. Woodcut, Public Domain.

In addition to posture, D' Alessandro depicts idleness, which in *Gli esclusi* is represented as caused by the institution and not as a characteristic of mental illness, through hands and gestures. All details of hands or portraits in which hands are in the foreground depict the two hands of the same person. These rub each other, hold each other, are in the position of prayer with outstretched or interlaced fingers (e.g. pp. 43, 47, 55). Alternatively, they are depicted in gestures of suffering, anxiety or are contracted (e.g. pp. 33, 76, 79). Only in two cases hands are depicted in communicative gestures (pp. 32, 52) or in the act of writing (pp. 13, 14-15). The spread at pp. 30-31 is particularly striking as it depicts old, wrinkled, hands that play with a crumpled scrap of newspaper: a visual simile that associates the inmate with waste, "dumped" in the asylum like garbage is dumped in the bin. Also the sequence at pages 18 and 19 is very telling (Figure 4).

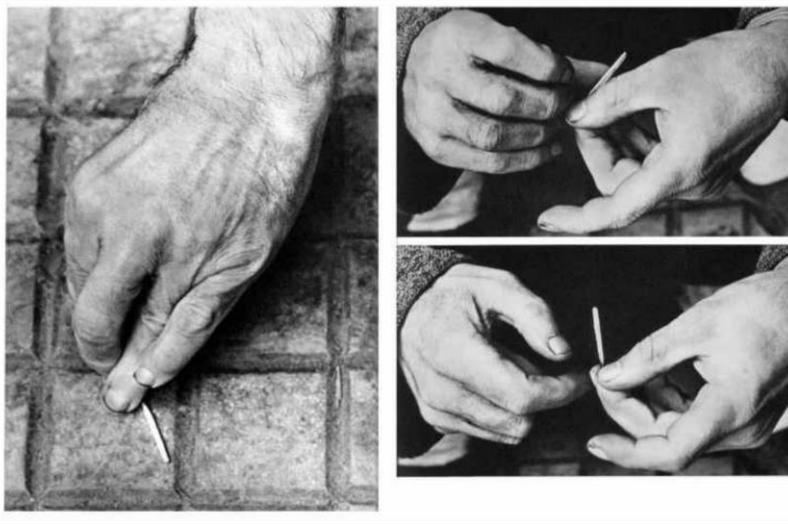


Figure 4 Luciano D'Alessandro, two pages from *Gli esclusi*, pp. 18 and 19. Attribution TBC.

It depicts hands that pick up a used match from the ground and play with it, evoking the “staff of madness”, a ubiquitous visual prop associated with fools and madmen (see Sforza Tarabochia 2021) that often appears in representations of melancholy. This is the case for instance in Lucas Cranach’s 1532 painting *Melancholia*, in which an angelic woman casts an empty gaze towards playing *putti* while distractedly carving her thin stick (Figure 5).



Figure 5 Lucas Cranach, *Melancholie*, Oil on Panel, 1532. Public Domain.

While D'Alessandro set out to document an existential and ontological condition – arguably common to all humans – we cannot accuse *Gli esclusi* of what Barthes called, in reference to the exhibition *The Family of Man*, “a ‘lyricism’ which only make the gestures of man look eternal the better to defuse them” (Barthes 1991: 102). It’s true that D'Alessandro, by omitting visual reference to the spaces and the specific institutional context of his artistic portraits, risks making them metaphors of a universal human condition. However, by employing traditional iconographic tropes of melancholy and idleness to signal the context of these images, he makes institutionalisation – rather than a generic ontological condition – evident through the effect that it has on the bodies, on gestures and on posture. The absence of a textual component, other than Piro’s introduction, encourages in readers an empathetic approach, that takes them closer to the inmates and makes them closely share their spaces.

Morire di classe

Morire di classe features a very different approach. As I have discussed elsewhere (Sforza Tarabochia 2018), Cerati and Berengo Gardin represent the asylum in a style that saddles photographic neorealism and Italian concerned photography – which Cerati and Berengo Gardin co-initiated by signing its manifesto publication “Fotografia di impegno civile” (Berengo Gardin et al. 1973: unnumbered page between 18 and 19). In *Morire di classe* socio-political criticism is much more patent and the photographic assemblage in a series displays a clear narrative intention. This is evidenced by Cerati and Berengo Gardin’s preference to group and large group portraits, rather than individual ones; by the presence of pictures of structures and wide-angle shots that portray not only people but also the contextual space; and by the presence of photos that were not taken in the asylum (ads, protests, etc). These contribute to the construction of a visual narrative and a sequence montage that we could define protocinematographic – in that it reveals the profound influence that cinema had on still photography

and on narrative more generally. The language and conventions of cinema (e.g. assemblage in sequence as editing or different angles of shots) are deployed to overcome the alleged stillness of photography – that Forgacs (2014: 233) considers its most prominent limit. Such protocinematographic elements leverage on photography's 'complex engagement with time and movement' which goes beyond 'flash photography and long exposures' to include 'all the procedures of assembly' such as 'photo essay, sequences, juxtapositions, montage' (Campany 2008: 18).

As opposed to *Gli esclusi*, *Morire di classe* features a complex textual apparatus that includes citations from psychiatry textbooks, texts that criticise psychiatry, poems, literature and theatre. Citations are formatted and laid out in a rather varied way and are always in some kind of relationship with the photos they caption. The association is not always immediately evident and seems to encourage readers to develop a critical awareness and their own interpretation. As I have argued in my previous article on the subject, unlike *Gli esclusi*, *Morire di classe* should be regarded as a 'phototext', defined as a 'struttura retorica, fondata sul dialogo e l'interazione [...] fra l'apparato fotografico e la parola scritta' (Carrara 2020: ch 2.1, para 9).

Whereas *Gli esclusi* declaredly explores the neglect and the "existential shrinking" of those interned in the asylum, *Morire di classe*, on the contrary, aims at "unmasking institutional violence" as the first (or at least a fundamental) step to reform psychiatry. As Basaglia and Ongaro write in their introduction to *Morire di classe*:

Ogni azione di rinnovamento nel campo specifico ha inizialmente questo significato: smascherare la violenza dell'istituzione psichiatrica [...] Questo atteggiamento essenzialmente pragmatico, ha consentito di svelare la faccia nuda del malato mentale, al di là delle etichette che la scienza gli aveva imposto e delle sovrastrutture che l'istituzione aveva provocato (Basaglia-Ongaro 2017: 568).

“Senza questo smascheramento”, Basaglia continues in another text, “che viene ad assumere un significato essenzialmente politico, ogni soluzione tecnica si riduce ad agire da copertura a problemi che non hanno niente a che fare con la malattia e con la scienza” (Basaglia 2017c: 515).

Psychiatry, from its earliest years, even before it was known as “psychiatry”, has always attempted to make madness visible, and to do so it has looked at the body of those suffering from a mental disorder. Suffice it to mention for instance physiognomics as employed by Pinel, Esquirol and Morison – aimed at pinning physical traits to mental disorders and impairment; or the photographic archives of lunatic asylums, such as the ones of the San Lazzaro (Reggio Emilia) or San Servolo (Venice), which visually catalogued all patients upon admission, sometimes pinning them to their diagnosis and sometimes comparing admission and discharge pictures. *Morire di classe* inverts the relationship between tools of visualisation and “psychiatric power” – as Foucault called it. Photography is no longer called upon to make mental illness visible to the gaze of the psychiatrist. On the contrary, it is employed as a tool to unmask, to reveal what institutional psychiatry – traditionally practiced behind the walls and gates of the asylum, far from public visibility – conceals.

In *Morire di classe*, there are of course several images of neglect and loneliness, individual or small group portraits, that do still recall traditional iconographic tropes much like *Gli esclusi* (see for instance pp. 10, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19). The photobooks are different for two pivotal reasons, that evidence, in the photographic language, the two different premises of *Gli esclusi* and *Morire di classe*. The first difference is that *Morire di classe*'s images are always shot with wide-angle lenses, 35mm or 28mm. Groups and individuals are always framed within the spatial context within which these images are captured. What emerges is no longer only the neglect, loneliness and desperation of the individual, but also the decrepit structures, the means of constraint, the insurmountable walls, the hospital-like aisles. Some of the pictures in *Morire di classe* are lifeless images: they depict the baths, the toilets, the empty courtyard (pp. 48, 49, 50, 52). The second difference is that all pictures but one in

Morire di classe are taken at the level of the eyes of the subjects portrayed, whereas in *Gli esclusi* several images are high-angle, *plongée* shots. High-angle shots put the photographed subject in a subordinate position to the photographer, or, at least, they suggest a shrinking of the subject. Arguably, this is controlled intentionally by D'Alessandro, who wants to communicate in this way the "existential shrinking" that is imposed on inmates. Cerati and Berengo Gardin do not, however, take the risk of using a visual code that, while effectively communicating the misery of the lives of those interned in the asylum, at the same time risks putting the photographer and thus also the viewer in a position of superiority towards patients.



Figure 6 Carla Cerati, from *Morire di classe*. (c) Carla Cerati, courtesy Elena Ceratti.

The only *plongée* shot in *Morire di classe*, taken by Cerati, is very important in the overall economy of the photobook (pp. 20-21) (Figure 6). The image is paired with a citation from the *Manuale per gli infermieri di ospedale psichiatrico* by Umberto De Giacomo (1959). The citation describes what should be done in case of bites – either by insects,

animals or inmates. The subject photographed is very attentive and present, thus the reader might be left puzzled by this association, if it is not interpreted in a contrastive manner: why would one assume that a person should bite? In an interview released to Francesca Orsi, Cerati herself revealed that the photographed subject actually did jump at her and bit her, right after she had taken the picture. Cerati comments: “io gli ho dato ragione. Come mi permettevo di fotografare uno che non era d'accordo?” (Cerati in Orsi 2008, 176). The photo alludes to this in the photographic grammar. The photographer, having used a wide-angle lens, must have gotten rather close, and she must have done it from above, to capture the only *plongée* shot that was selected to be included in *Morire di classe*: a photographic gesture that the photographer herself regards as aggressive.

Pages 26 and 27 are another peculiar combination, that exemplifies both the narrative and the protocinematographic approaches (Figure 7).



Figure 7 From *Morire di Classe*, pp. 26-27. Attribution TBC.

The image on the left portrays a group of female inmates in an asylum courtyard. They lay on the floor, crouched, crossed arms, gaze to the floor, tattered look. One of them, crouched on the floor, is in a straitjacket. The image on the right portrays what is probably a bourgeois *soirée*. A group of elegantly dressed young people chats on a sofa in front of a marble coffee table. They smoke and drink wine from

stem glasses. Two paintings loom over them. This picture is captioned by a citation from the play *Marat/Sade: The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the direction of the Marquis de Sade* by Peter Weiss (1964). This is a complex mis-en-abyme that stages the marquis de Sade, interned in the Charenton asylum, while he directs a play on Marat's assassination. The citation is an exclamation by Coulmier, the director of the Charenton asylum, who interrupts Sade's *Marat* rehearsals saying: "Signor De Sade sono costretto a protestare / qui eravamo d'accordo di tagliare" – "I must protest / here we agreed to cut". If we read this in protocinematographic terms this sentence binds very clearly the two pictures. Foucault, one of the main points of reference to Basaglia and to critics of institutional psychiatry, had hypothesised that internment in the asylum ultimately served the purpose of maintaining the bourgeois social order, through the removal from society of unproductive individuals. This seems to be the reason for Coulmier's protest in the context of *Morire di classe*: the photographers decide to "cut" from the asylum courtyard to the bourgeois *soiree*, revealing that these are two sides of the same coin. But this, says the fictional director of the Charenton asylum, should not have been revealed – the film should have been "cut" before revealing that psychiatry serves the purpose of maintaining the bourgeois social order.

Gli esclusi focuses on the signs that madness and internment in the asylum leave on the bodies of inmates – expressions, gestures, posture. In *Morire di classe* the signs of madness and segregation are external, to emphasise the marginalisation of inmates and their social conditions of being rejects of society – "relitti, bucce di uomini" says Rilke in his *Quaderni* as quoted in *Morire di classe*. Numerous photographs are taken from behind a fence (e.g. p. 16), gate (e.g. p. 59) or bars (e.g. p. 61). Images often reveal tall (and decrepit) walls behind the inmates (e.g. p. 15). The condition of madness is that of being caged or imprisoned, segregated, marginalised. In his paintings, Goya had already used a similar strategy of visual composition to convey a comparable meaning. For instance, in *La casa de locos* (1812-1819) (Figure 8) we can see that the whole upper half of the painting is a wall, with a window with bars, whereas in the *Corral de locos* (1794 ca) the central portion is entirely occupied by a

featureless wall that separates the lunatics (bottom third) from the light (upper third).



Figure 8 Francisco de Goya, *La casa de locos*, Oil on panel, 1808. Public Domain.

To conclude, *Gli esclusi* and *Morire di classe* visually contribute to the cultural climate that surrounds the Italian psychiatric reform between the 1960s and 1970s and they do so in different ways. In *Gli esclusi*, D'Alessandro deploys a neorealist and intimistic approach to convey the phenomeno-existentialist considerations by Sergio Piro, who employed him to document life in the asylum. *Gli esclusi* thus portrays the loneliness and the individual neglect that inmates live because of the psychiatric institution – and this adds up to the suffering created by the mental disorder. *Morire di classe*, on the contrary, perhaps because it was commissioned by the very militant Franco Basaglia and Franca Ongaro, takes a much clearer political direction. Its visual grammar and its montage and assemblage strategies show the overcoming of neorealist intimism and the opening towards concerned photography. The complex narrative and communicative strategies adopted, along with the protocinematographic editing, create a multifaceted narrative that

aims at the unmasking of institutional psychiatry for which Basaglia and Ongaro advocated.

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