Photography, Psychiatry, and Impegno.

Morire di Classe (1969) Between Neorealism and Postmodernism

The Italian reform of psychiatric healthcare brought about, in 1978, the closure of existing mental asylums and a *de facto* ban on psychiatric hospitals, wards and inpatient facilities.[1] This was the culmination of a long and winding path that involved, along with clinical and social experimentations, also a coherent political strategy of communication, in which photography, arguably, played a prominent role. In this article, I analyse one of the most controversial and hybrid elements of this strategy, the photobook *Morire di Classe. La condizione manicomiale fotografata da Carla Cerati e Gianni Berengo Gardin* (*Death by Class. Conditions in Mental Asylums Photographed by Carla Cerati and Gianni Berengo Gardin*),[2] edited by Franco Basaglia and his wife Franca Ongaro—the foremost proponents of the reform. The aim of my analysis is threefold. The first is to unravel how much Basaglia's political theory informed *MDC* even at the level of the photographic gaze, to understand the photobook as an integral part of Basaglia's political strategy. The second is to reveal the hybrid and transitional nature of *MDC* within the history of Italian photography by means of an analysis of its pictures and their 'montage' in the photobook. Namely I will situate it between the end of the neorealist legacy, the beginning of 'concerned' photography in Italy,[3] and show the extent to which it even anticipates forms of postmodern *impegno*[4] in

---

[2] Henceforth referred to as MDC.
[3] Patrizia Regorda, *La concerned photography in Italia. Fotografia e impegno civile* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2010).
[4] See Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug, 'Introduction', in: Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (eds.) *Postmodern* Impegno. *Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture* (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 1–29.

still photography. The third aim is to debunk a number of criticisms that have been levelled against the photobook.

1. *Morire di Classe*: Reception and Criticism

Cerati and Berengo Gardin's work in *MDC* did not go unnoticed when it was first released: they won the *Premio Palazzi per il reportage* soon after the photobook was published by Einaudi in 1969. Many thus claim that *MDC* was instrumental to the struggle against institutional psychiatry to different extents and in different ways.[5] However, Foot has recently argued against this claim, maintaining that the *MDC*'s influence cannot be measured, and, if anything, its editorial history seems to suggest the opposite: the book only had two editions and sold approximately 11,000 copies, going out of print by the early 1980s.[6] I refer the reader to Foot's paper for a comprehensive recount of the editorial history of *MDC* and its reception. For the purpose of this paper, I will rather focus on more recent references to *MDC*. So far, several scholars have focused their attention on *MDC*, at least in passing.[7] Russo counts it as among the 'fotoreportage[s] umanitar[i]'[8] of the 1960s in Italy, D'Autilia considers it as the initiator of the trend 'estetico-emotivo'[9] of the representation of psychiatric matters in Italian photojournalism, which, according to Schinaia derives from 'chiamare come testimoni dell'esistenza manicomiale fotografi […] che […] avrebbero potuto

---

[5] See for instance: Franca Ongaro Basaglia (ed.), *Per non dimenticare. 1968. La realtà manicomiale di 'Morire di classe* (Turin: Edizioni Gruppo Abele); Nico Pitrelli, *L'uomo che restituì la parola ai matti: Franco Basaglia, la comunicazione e la fine dei manicomi* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2004); Federica Manzoli, 'La follia per immagini. Storia fotografica della fine dei manicomi', *JCOM*, 3(2) (2004), pp. 1–7; Maria Grazia Giannichedda, 'Introduzione', in Franco Ongaro Basaglia (ed.) *Franco Basaglia. L'utopia della realtà* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), pp.vii-lii; Denis Curti, *Giani Berengo Gardin. Stories of a Photographer* (Venice: Marsilio, 2013).

[6] Foot, p. 28.

[7] E.g. Manzoli; Pitrelli; David Forgacs, *Italy's Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation Since 1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); John Foot, 'Photography and radical psychiatry in Italy in the 1960s. The case of the photobook *Morire di classe* (1969)'. *History of Psychiatry*. 26(1) (2015), pp. 19-35.

[8] Antonella Russo, *Storia culturale della fotografia italiana. Dal neorealismo al postmoderno*. (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), p. 314.

[9] Gabriele D'Autilia, *Storia della fotografia in Italia. Dal 1839 a oggi*. (Turin: Einaudi, 2012), p. 342.

"costruire" immagini ad alta risonanza emotiva'.[10] The only two substantive contributions in English on *MDC* (Foot's 2015 article 'Photography and Radical Psychiatry' and Forgacs' chapter 'Asylums') move rather unwarranted criticisms to the photobook and it is on these that I will focus in this section.

Critics seem to have reached a consensus that *MDC* should be regarded primarily as a not-very-successful pamphlet of political anti-institutional propaganda, for a number of reasons. Since the pictures in *MDC* were taken between April and October 1968, in a number of institutions (Gorizia, Florence and Parma) where 'some sort of change' was already taking place,[11] Foot argues that *MDC* could be regarded as a 'little bit of a fake product, designed to work above all for reasons of politics and "the cause"'.[12] The pictures do not document the progress of the changes that were taking place (such as adoption of the 'therapeutic community', limited open door policies, etc.), but represent inmates in a 'passive state, a state from which many had escaped'.[13] To a certain extent therefore *MDC* 're-victimised them, in order to serve the needs of the movement'.[14] This re-victimisation and de-powering of patients, according to Forgacs, also derives from the fact that the pictured subjects 'are spoken about or spoken for' in *MDC*, since the photobook features almost no quotes from the patients' themselves and 'we do not hear or see their own words'.[15]

Photography itself is not the right medium to document the asylum, continues Forgacs, since it has a limited 'capacity to record any kind of complex social information'[16]: it is a silent, synthetic and one-way recording process. With these intrinsic limits it comes as no surprise to Forgacs (2014: 233) that the photographers' gazes dwelled on 'what struck

---

[10] Cosimo Schinaia, 'Fotografia e psichiatria', in: Uliano Lucas (ed.) *Storia d'Italia. Annali 20. L'immagine fotografica 1945–2000.* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), p. 467.
[11] Foot, p. 23.
[12] Ibid., p. 24.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Forgacs, p. 232.
[16] Ibid., p. 234.

them most: [asylums] and their residents, in particular their "alienated" appearance and behaviour'. Ultimately, the pictures in *MDC* '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'.[17]

While Forgacs does not mention this explicitly in relation to *MDC*, the issue of voyeurism, the 'unreciprocated looking'[18] of the photographer/cinematographer (and thus the viewer) is a recurring concern in his criticism of other visual documentaries of Italian asylums in the same chapter. This also returns implicitly in Foot's article when he says that the photos in *MDC* are very *anti-basaglian* in that the gaze of the photographers objectifies the patients—it depicts 'patients as objects and not subjects'.[19]

Ultimately Foot's criticism is that *MDC* was a work of propaganda, aimed at bluntly denouncing the abuses of institutionalisation and stressing what Basaglia had regarded in 1964 as the most urgent point in the agenda of 'radical psychiatry': the destruction of the asylum. Foot concludes that the book's contribution to the reform of psychiatric health care and its influence have been 'by and large overstated'.[20]

Schinaia had already maintained that, even if 'l'aggressione implicita in ogni fotografia venne in qualche modo sublimata dalle finalità di queste immagini',[21] still the photos in *MDC* 'tendono a somigliarsi e rischiano di darci […] un'immagine di uniformità […]: "il matto fotografato dal di dentro" […] la fisiognomica, anche se capovolta di senso, determina l'osservazione; l'originaria relazione *facies*/follia viene sostituita dalla simmetria totalizzante *facies*/esclusione sociale'.[22]

---

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 232.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 240.
[19] Foot, p. 25.
[20] Foot, pp. 28-29.
[21] Schinaia, p. 463.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 471.

Although I disagree with these criticisms for reasons I will go into below, I nevertheless cannot embrace Manzoli's claim, according to which photographers such as Berengo Gardin and Cerati were 'seppur temporanei abitanti'[23] of the asylum. While the photographers undeniably bore witness to the abysmal conditions in (some of) the asylums they visited and visually revealed the urgency of a reform, they could not have done this as 'temporanei abitanti'—which is clearly an oxymoron.

2. *Morire di Classe* in Context: Neorealism and Concerned Photography

All the studies above, regardless of their opinion on *MDC*, seem to put the photographer in the impossible position of choosing between a complete involvement with the subject and a scopophiliac gaze. However, when it comes to documentarism and, at the end of the day, *realism*, a notion itself riddled with complexities, the issue of the photographer's gaze is all the more complicated. The central reference in this context is of course Italian neorealism, arguably the best-known and most studied current in Italian cinema. The label Italian neorealist cinema describes a number of films by Rossellini, Visconti and De Sica, produced between 1942 (Visconti's *Ossessione*) and the 1950s. As Cardullo has it, these films had in common that they 'reacted not only against the banality that had long been the dominant mode of Italian cinema, but also against prevailing socioeconomic conditions in Italy'.[24] Neorealist directors famously cast non-professional actors, filmed on location with minimal budgets, often improvised scripts, favoured tracking and long takes over montage. They did this in an effort to achieve realism by minimising artifice. In 1948, however, Bazin had already noted that one of the central merits of Italian neorealist cinema was in fact that it

---

[23] Manzoli, p. 4.
[24] Bert Cardullo, 'What is Neorealism?', in Bert Cardullo (ed.), *Andrè Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (New York: Continuum 2011), p. 19.

'demonstrated that every realism in art was first profoundly aesthetic',[25] concluding that 'realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice'[26] and that 'some measure of reality must always be sacrificed in the effort of achieving it'.[27]

Neorealist photography, despite being perhaps a shorter-lived experience,[28] took many cues from neorealist cinema. In particular, as Taramelli notes,

> Come in una sorta di travaso naturale e spontaneo, letteratura, cinema, fotografia, assumono, e fanno proprie, procedure e meccanismi tipici della narrazione orale, a cominciare dal punto di vista distaccato e anonimo proprio della condizione del narrare.[29]

Detached eye and priority to the narrative aspect of photography are the main characteristics of photographic neorealism along with a 'punto di vista etico [che] coniuga l'ansia e l'assillo della verità con il bisogno, quasi istintivo, di solidarietà umana, e di impegno civile. La volontà di *engagement* […] diviene […] un modello di comportamento dell'artista e dell'intellettuale'.[30] Grespi also reminds us that at least two decades before *MDC*, Italian photographic neorealism had already understood that 'it is possible to look at the world without filters [...] the secret is to become foreign'.[31] For the neorealists, a purely documentary photographic realism, whether it comes from a cold and detached or fully involved gaze, is simply not achievable, and perhaps not even desirable. As Turroni put it, 'il realismo non è questione né di contenuti né di forme bensì di dialettica spirituale, di una

---

[25] Andrè Bazin, 'Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation', in Bert Cardullo (ed.), *Andrè Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (New York: Continuum 2011), p. 37

[26] Ibid., p. 38.

[27] Ibid., p. 41.

[28] Russo, p. 9.

[29] Ennery Taramelli, *Viaggio nell'Italia del neorealismo. La fotografia tra letteratura e cinema* (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1995), p. 12.

[30] Taramelli, p. 13.

[31] Barbara Grespi, 'Italian Neo-Realism between Cinema and Photography', in: Sara Patricia Hill and Giuliana Minghelli (eds.) *Stillness in Motion: Italy, Photography, and the Meanings of Modernity*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), p. 199.

capacità di vedere, narrare e giudicare, infine di superare in stile personale la realtà della cronaca'.[32]

Anticipated by Lattauda's 1939 'vagabondaggi solitari'[33] in *Occhio Quadrato*, photographic neorealism reaches its 'fase più alta' with the 'fotoracconto' or 'fototesto' of the 1940s, a 'momento "etico"', a 'personale appello all'impegno civile e morale'.[34] The neorealist phototext, epitomised by Patellani's works in the weekly magazine *Tempo* and Crocenzi's in *Il Politecnico*,[35] is 'una sorta di film-documentario statico con sequenze narrative di immagini indipendenti dai testi che fungono da commento sonoro',[36] a telling description in which, as we will see shortly, *MDC* fits very well. Photography embraces 'il linguaggio filmico come modello narrativo'; the 'sintesi narrativa di cinema e fotografia', in the phototext becomes epitome of what Patellani named, in 1943, journalism 'nuova formula',[37] 'che ai valori formali, o piuttosto a modelli e stereotipi di tipo figurativo, oppone il modello linguistico e narrativo del cinema documentario'.[38]

Whilst according to Russo, by the 1950s 'gli elementi innovativi che ne avevano contraddistinto la ricerca iniziarono a cristallizzarsi, fino a fare del Neorealismo una sorta di vuoto cliché',[39] the Neorealist imbrication of detached gaze, ethical committment, narration, realism and cinematic language had a long lasting influence on Italian still photography, especially in photojournalism. We can especially recognise it in two currents of Italian photography: the abovementioned 'fotoreportages umanitari' and Italian 'concerned photography', both of which share numerous characteristics with *MDC*.

---

[32] Giuseppe Turroni, 'Il formalismo in fotografia'. *Fotografia. Rivista mensile d'arte e tecnica fotografica* (June 1957), p. 19.
[33] Ibid., p. 75.
[34] Russo, p. 36.
[35] E.g. Federico Patellani, 'Organizzazione B', in *Tempo Nuovo*, I, 24 gennaio 1946, n.2, pp.4-5. Luigi Crocenzi, 'Occhio su Milano', in *Il Politecnico*, 1 maggio 1946, n. 29, pp. 14-15.
[36] Taramelli, p. 108.
[37] Federico Patellani, 'Il giornalista nuova formula', in Cesare Colombo (ed.) *Lo sguardo critico. Cultura e fotografia in Italia 1943-1968* (Turin: Agorà 2003), pp. 151-155.
[38] Ibid., p. 108.
[39] Russo, p. 9.

As Russo has it, the 'fotoreportage umanitari' of the 1960s, are, on the one hand 'aperti specialmente al vissuto degli umili'[40] much like Neorealist phototexts, but, on the other, they feature a photography that emancipates from the 'reportage importato a un tardo Neorealismo, per sperimentare servizi fotografici di ricerca e approfondimento culturale'.[41] The privileged outlet of these 'humanitarian photoreportages' is no longer the magazine, but the photobook, considered as the 'mezzo di emancipazione dal ricatto delle redazioni giornalistiche'.[42] As examples of the Italian humanitarian photoreportage photobook we should mention, along with *MDC*, D'Alessandro's 1969 *Gli Esclusi*, on the asylum in Nocera Superiore, and Carmi's 1965 *Genova-Porto*.[43]

Between 12 and 30 November 1968 the gallery *Il Diaframma* in Milan hosted an exhibition featuring, among other works, a selection of pictures by Berengo Gardin, which were soon to be included in *MDC*. The title of the exhibition was *Il nuovo impegno*.[44] Regorda considers it an anticipation of the founding of the group 'The Concerned Italiano',[45] which brought, in 1973, Cornell Capa's conception of 'concerned photography' to Italy. Berengo Gardin and Cerati were among the founding members of this group, and among the signatories of its manifesto, entitled *Fotografia di impegno civile*. The purpose of the manifesto was to show 'quello che è il ruolo del fotografo, quali sono i suoi interessi e il punto d'arrivo del suo lavoro quando tenta di testimoniare la realtà in cui vive e arriva talvolta a coinvolgersi nel suo soggetto. Una "fotografia" quindi, interessa come impegno civile, come momento di dialogo con la realtà […] Facendo proprio l'ideale della fotografia

---

[40] Russo, p. 302.
[41] Russo, p. 306.
[42] D'Autilia, p. 342.
[43] Luciano D'Alessandro and Sergio Piro, *Gli Esclusi. Fotoreportage da un'istituzione totale* (Milan: Il Diaframma, 1969); Lisetta Carmi and Piero Racanicchi, 'Genova-Porto', *Popular Photography Italiana*, (92, Feb. 1965), pp. 48-49.
[44] Pierpaolo Preti, 'Mostre al Diaframma'. *Popular Photography Italiana* (136, 1969).
[45] Regorda, p. 99.

come impegno civile, il Gruppo si propone di contribuire a una cosciente testimonianza del nostro tempo'.[46]

MDC is published in 1969, during the years of the humanitarian photoreportage and Italian concerned photography, and it takes cues from both. It incarnates, as I will show in the following sections, the legacy of neorealism—imbricating narration, realism, cinematic techniques and political commitment—yet at the same time it transcends neorealism, thanks to the neighbouring currents of humanitarian photoreportage and Italian concerned photography, driving the neorealist legacy towards *ante litteram* forms of postmodernism. It is, as I will claim in the following section, an *ethical* stance that characterises the gaze of the photographers and their *personal* involvement with the photographed reality, that exemplifies this drive towards postmodernism. In the case of *MDC*, this ethical stance can be regarded as a form of *impegno* that permeates the aesthetics and assemblage of the photo essay.

3. To Reform is to Reveal. Photography and the Political Role of 'Unmasking'

According to Sontag 'all that photography's program of realism actually implies is the belief that reality is hidden. And, being hidden, is something to be unveiled. Whatever the camera records is a disclosure'.[47] *MDC*'s subtitle, *la condizione manicomiale fotografata*, hints precisely at this: Cerati and Berengo Gardin were to *reveal*, through photography, the reality that was structurally and ideologically hidden behind the walls of the asylum of old.

It is to this extent that *MDC* can be regarded as part of Basaglia's political strategy and thought: the first attack against the institution in the form of a *smascheramento*, (unmasking, but also revealing, exposing, unveiling). It is the unmasking of that paradoxical

---

[46] CPI. 'The Concerned Photographer—Gruppo italiano'. *Il Diaframma—fotografia italiana* (182, May 1973).
[47] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. (New York: RosettaBooks LLC, 2005), p. 94.

world which was becoming the *denied institution* (*istituzione negata*), but that, in the context portrayed in *MDC*, was still a concealed, *masked*, institution.[48]

Foot notices that *MDC* is a 'basaglian book', in which 'various aspects of Basaglian philosophy ran', namely: 'analysis of total institutions', unravelling of the 'violent and long-term effects of [...] institutionalization' and 'unambiguous social analysis of the asylum system'.[49] While these aspects are pivotal in the book and in Basaglia's work, if we are to talk about his philosophical stance, the notion of *smascheramento* (unmasking) comes more clearly into focus in relation to the nature of *MDC*, a photobook. The notion of *smascheramento* of the 'concealed institution' knits *MDC* with Basaglia's political strategy and system of thought but also casts clearer light on Berengo Gardin and Cerati's gazes: not voyeurs but *unmaskers*, inaugural photographers of the wave of *concerned* photography in Italy that characterised the legacy of photographic neorealism.

The introduction to *MDC* by Basaglia and Ongaro reveals the meaning of *smascheramento*:

> 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. [50]

The first step towards reforming psychiatric healthcare must be to unmask the violence of the institution, that is to say, in brief and at risk of oversimplifying: reform can

---

[48] E.g. Franco Basaglia, 'Il problema della gestione' in Franco Basaglia, *Scritti*, ed. by Franca Ongaro Basaglia, Vol. 1 (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), p. 521.

[49] Foot, pp. 25-26.

[50] Franco Basaglia and Franca Ongaro Basaglia (eds.). *Morire di classe. La condizione manicomiale fotografata da Carla Cerati e Gianni Berengo Gardin*. (Trieste: Editore Duemilauno Agenzia Sociale, 2008), p. 3. The first edition of *MDC* (1969) and its anastatic reproduction (2008) have no page numbers. Therefore, when I refer to pages in *MDC* I use a custom numbering, whereby the title page is 1, Basaglia's introduction begins at page 2, and ends with the first picture at page 5. Subsequent numbering is continuous.

only begin by revealing that the psychiatric hospital is an instrument of social control, aimed at containing and marginalising the deviant behaviour of the subaltern social classes, masking this marginalisation as a medical intervention. *Unmasking* is therefore an integral part of the political strategy to be adopted in 'destroying the asylum'. The term itself, *unmasking*, evokes the field of vision and reveals the centrality of both seeing and making visible in the strategy of reform of institutional psychiatry. At the other end of the spectrum, however, it is also important to remember, continue Basaglia and Ongaro, that the unmasking cannot be done once and for all, because 'il pericolo di celare le nuove contraddizioni della realtà sotto una nuova ideologia che le spieghi o le copre è presente in ogni azione di rinnovamento'.[51] Unmasking is thus best understood as an attitude rather than an action that can be completed once and for all; it is an ethical stance of the gaze, a way of looking, seeing, and showing.

The political acceptation of *smascheramento* in Basaglia's writings first appears in 1967, when he affirms that the introduction of the therapeutic community has been crucial not as a therapeutic instrument *per se* but in its function of 'smascheramento di ciò che il malato mentale era ritenuto e non è'.[52] The 'new' psychiatrists have, continues Basaglia in a different paper, 'smascherato la truffa della psichiatria tradizionale'.[53] Finally, to mention but a few occurrences of the term before *MDC*, in 1968 Basaglia is very clear about the political dimension of *smascheramento*: 'senza questo smascheramento, 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'.[54]

---

[51] *Ibid.*

[52] Franco Basaglia, 'Presentazione a *Che cos'è la psichiatria?*' in Franco Basaglia, *Scritti*, ed. by Franca Ongaro Basaglia, Vol. 1 (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), p. 392.

[53] Franco Basaglia, 'Esclusione, programmazione e integrazione' in Franco Basaglia, *Scritti*, ed. by Franca Ongaro Basaglia, Vol. 1 (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), p. 414.

[54] Franco Basaglia, 'La comunità terapeutica e le istituzioni psichiatriche' in Franco Basaglia, *Scritti*, ed. by Franca Ongaro Basaglia, Vol. 2 (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), p. 13.

The very first mention of *smascheramento* in Basaglia's work, however, has no political implication, but refers to his early phenomeno-existentialist conception of subjectivity. According to Basaglia, subjectivity amounts to a negotiated distance from the other, which he calls 'alterità', 'l'accettazione contemporanea della mia e dell'altrui fattità'.[55] *Alterità* is the condition in which I recognise the other as a determining presence for myself, but I also recognise myself as a determining presence for the other, and through this double recognition I am able to remain exposed to otherness without sinking into it. The opposite of *otherness* is 'alienità', a state in which, unable to recognise the presence of the other (from which I would paradoxically withdraw to protect myself), I am unable to determine myself, and lose the 'intervallo dove poter appropriarmi del mio stesso corpo, abbandonato in una promiscuità in cui l'altro mi urge senza tregua, da tutti i lati e mi invade'.[56] Subjectivity thus derives from the encounter with the other, from intersubjectivity, which in turn is initially established at the level of the reciprocal gaze. Basaglia continues: 'l'uomo non può attuare questo atto di riflessione su di sé se non attraverso lo sguardo altrui: è lo sguardo d'altri […] che mi rende cosciente di me, perché solo attraverso lo sguardo d'altri io posso essere la mia oggettività'.[57] The other's gaze makes me aware of the distance between me and the other: 'in presenza dello sguardo altrui […] vivo il mio essere scoperto, esposto, smascherato a me stesso in un sentimento […] che mi distanzia e mi difende dall'invasione dell'altro'.[58]

Subjectivity comes into being as constitutively secondary to intersubjectivity through the objectifying gaze of the other—a notion that Basaglia draws on Sartre—which determines my being a subject. Objectification—becoming an object of the other's gaze—is necessary to be a subject. If the *unmasking* of the self by means of the gaze of the other is such a central

---

[55] Franco Basaglia, 'Corpo, sguardo e silenzio. L'enigma della soggettività in psichiatria' in Franco Basaglia, *Scritti*, ed. by Franca Ongaro Basaglia, Vol. 1 (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), p. 298.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., p. 299.
[58] Ibid., pp. 299–300.

feature of subjectivity, according to Basaglia, no wonder it becomes central also in his struggle against the institution of psychiatry, when his philosophical reflection shifts markedly towards political philosophy and away from his initial phenomeno-existentialist roots (although, as I have shown elsewhere,[59] much of his initial reflection consistently informs his latter, politicised, work). If these considerations do not debunk Foot's claim that 'depicting patients as objects and not subjects [...] was profoundly anti-Basaglian'[60] outright, at least they certainly problemitise his use of the notion of 'object' and 'subject' in Basaglia's work.

MDC's contribution to the work of reform that 'radical psychiatry' and Basaglia especially, were starting to implement between the 1960s and 1970s, should therefore be considered in light of the above considerations. Its role was the *unmasking* of the institution, through photography. In an institution that conceals—willingly or not—, the first revolutionary act is to reveal. This shift in perspective enables us to understand Cerati and Berengo Gardin's work in a different light. Far from being curious observers peering into a habitat, they aptly represent the gaze of the concerned photographer, committed to the unmasking of the inhuman conditions of life in the asylum. As photography was the medium chosen in *MDC* to carry out this unmasking, I believe it crucial to read *MDC* not only as a cultural and editorial product but also, and especially, as a photo essay. In doing so I will show that the grammar of the photos and the syntax of their assemblages unravels the politics of the unmasking that underpin them and, with it, the ethical stance that the photographers express through their gaze.

---

[59] Alvise Sforza Tarabochia, *Psychiatry, Subjectivity, Community. Franco Basaglia and Biopolitics*. (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2013).
[60] Foot, p. 25.

4. Reading *Morire di classe* as a Photo Essay

As Foot has suggested, the language of advertisement and that of propaganda are indeed present in *MDC*.[61] For this reason, we can safely assume with Barthes that 'the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional'.[62] However, as I will shortly show, we can hardly maintain that, for these same reasons, 'in many ways, [*MDC*] was part of the "society of the spectacle", a product of that same society which it was attacking';[63] and certainly we cannot affirm that *MDC* is 'a little bit of a fake product'.[64] If in the society of the spectacle 'the real world is transformed into mere images'[65] and 'all real activity [is] forcibly channelled into the global construction of the spectacle',[66] *MDC* seems to rest at the opposite side of the spectrum: these images arguably urge readers to action—not the opposite. In this light, I believe *MDC* could be regarded as a *détournement*, Debord's 'situationist' strategy to '[turn] expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself'.[67]

I will return to this briefly, but for the time being suffice it to acknowledge that if in the context of the society of the spectacle 'the accelerated image world began to feel dehumanizing, repetitive and monotonous', then '*slowness*, the deliberate refusal of speed, became central in vanguard art and culture and we can see this change of pace both in photography and film'.[68] *MDC* achieves a deliberate slowness and demonstrates a marked refusal of the canons of the society of the spectacle by adopting a number of protocinematic features that give a pace and rhythm to the photo essay.

---

[61] Ibid., p. 20 and p. 24.

[62] Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image' in Roland Barthes. *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 33.

[63] Foot, p. 20.

[64] Ibid., p. 24.

[65] Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. by Ken Knabb, (London: Rebel Press, 2004), p. 18.

[66] Ibid., p. 27.

[67] Douglas Holt and Douglas Cameron, *Cultural Strategy Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 252.

[68] David Campany, *Photography and Cinema*. (London: Reaktion Books), p. 36.

4.1 Protocinematic Features

Forgacs maintains that photography, being motionless and soundless, is not the appropriate medium for documenting the asylum.[69] However, as Campany has it 'photography has always had its own complex engagement with time and movement'.[70] This is true not only because of 'flash photography and long exposures'—inclusions of time and movement within the individual frame by technical means—but also and perhaps especially in 'all the procedures of assembly [such as] the album, [...] the photo essay, sequences, juxtapositions, montage'.[71] When facing such assemblies of photos, 'naturally [...] the signifier of connotation is [...] no longer to be found at the level of any one of the fragments of the sequence but at that [...] of the concatenation'.[72] Individual frames and their concatenation in *MDC* reveal from the very beginning a number of 'protocinematic' features that compensate for the limits Forgacs regards as intrinsic to photography. I refer to these features as 'protocinematic' (and not 'cinematic') insofar as I believe they reveal the profound influence cinema had on still photography. The language and conventions of cinema (including in this different types of shot and editing techniques for instance) is purposefully adopted in *MDC*, as I will shortly show, in order to transcend the alleged stillness of photography.

The deployment in print of such protocinematic features is typical of neorealist photography and its legacy as I have anticipated above. As Grespi has it:

[B]y the time photography became neorealist [...] film had already won the battle [...]

The phototext—in which events are recounted through horizontal strips of

---

[69] Forgacs, p. 234.
[70] Campany, p. 18.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message' in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 24.

photographs [...] like a movie on paper—gradually comes to prominence. [...] The

magazine makes itself into a paper film.[73]

MDC can indeed be regarded as part of the legacy of the neorealist phototext as it is a

'storyboard fotografico che ricalc[a] i tempi narrativi cinematografici',[74] insofar as it applies

to the letter Vittorini's guideline that photos must be introduced in photo essays 'con criterio

cinematografico e non già vignettistico, creando accanto al testo una specie di film

immobile'.[75]

[insert Figure 1 - FIG01.TIF]

MDC's 'film immobile' begins when Basaglia and Ongaro's introduction ends, on the

same page as the first picture (Fig. 1), which features three inmates leaning on a white wall

on which the first *mise-en-abyme* of *MDC* hangs. It is a poster of Barnard, the surgeon who

performed the first successful heart transplant in humans. He looks upwards; the image is

captioned: 'The miraculous hands'. Foot rightly reads in it a 'blunt' message: 'medicine has

done nothing to help these people'.[76] The composition of the image strengthens the message

as the poster dominates the inmates from above. The inmates' and Barnard's gazes don't

meet. Barnard looks upwards and beyond the frame, his hands don't reach out. The inmates

look downwards. The same image repeats on the following page, followed by a citation from

Weiss's *Marat/Sade*.[77] The repetition of identical images in adjacent, two-page spreads (e.g.

pp. 30–31, 36–37, 52–53, and 64–66); consecutive pages (such as the bedded inmate reading

a newspaper on pp. 73 and 75); and consecutive pages, but with different formats (e.g. 44–45;

46–47) recurs often in *MDC*. I would not compare these to pairs of stereoscopic photographs,

---

[73] Grespi, p. 193.
[74] Russo, p. 29.
[75] Elio Vittorini, 'La fotografia strizza l'occhio alla pagina'. *Cinema Nuovo. Rassegna bimestrale di cultura* (33, 1954), p. 200.
[76] Foot, p. 26.
[77] Peter Weiss, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. Trans. by G. Skelton. (New York: Atheneum, 1966).

as Forgacs suggests,[78] and which could evoke the sense of entertainment associated with the early inception of stereoscopy. I would rather consider them cinematic repetitions of the frame, such as long takes or locked-down shots in which the exact repetition of the image suggests the monotony of everyday life in the asylum and the continuity of a condition of stillness and alleged chronicity.

The 'long take' is followed by what we could regard as 'opening credits'. Weiss's *Marat/Sade* is a complex play within a play: set in the asylum of Charenton in 1808, the play stages the famous inmate Marquis de Sade directing a play about the assassination of Marat in 1793, featuring other inmates as actors, with numerous interruptions by the staff of the asylum. *MDC*'s 'opening credits' are one of these interruptions, by director of the asylum, Columier, who is reacting to the gruesome assassination of Marat as staged by Sade. Columier abruptly says that he cannot allow this, because 'after all, we invited the public here to show them that our patients are not all social lepers'.[79] Columier has invited the general public into the asylum to attend a fictional *play* that shows, through fiction, that not all patients are social lepers. The invitation to 'read' *MDC* embodies the exact opposite: the curators invite the public to see that inmates *are* social lepers, rejects (*rifiuti della società* in the Italian version) even if the institution *masks* this rejection as a medical intervention to deal with mental illness. As I will show later, appeals to and involvement of the reader, are a central characteristic in *MDC* and reveal its anticipation of postmodern *impegno*.

[insert Figure 2 - FIG02.TIF]

Page 8 (Fig. 2, top left) features the first of a series of pictures of the same subject, an asylum courtyard with some female inmates. The picture is taken with a wide-angle lens, full frontal. The left inmate, in uniform, stands; in the background, another woman is constrained

---

[78] Forgacs, p. 203.
[79] Weiss, p. 22.

to a chair and in the foreground another woman in uniform, sitting on a bench, looks directly at the camera. At page 15 (Fig. 2, top right) the camera seems to pan right; the woman on the bench, now in half-profile, follows the camera with her eyes, revealing another inmate crouched in a position of desperation on the right. The movement seems to continue onto the next page (Fig. 2, bottom left): It looks as if the camera were panning further right and *out*, mimicking a cinematic movement to reveal that the courtyard is fenced. Another inmate is caught walking into the frame, in movement, motion-blurred. The woman on the bench no longer looks at the camera and is portrayed in profile. The three pictures in sequence can be read in cinematic terms as a panning and tracking-out shot. The beginning of the panning shot reveals the presence of the photographer as receiver of the subject's gaze; then the photographic gaze slowly moves outside. The first picture is uncommented, the second is accompanied by a quote from Brecht's prologue to his play *The Exception and the Rule*, in which Brecht asks the reader 'when a thing continually occurs not on that account to find it natural'.[80] This is what is asked of the reader of *MDC*: do not think that these images are natural nor unalterable, we are here to change these conditions. The sequence on the same subject finishes with a cut on page 51 (Fig. 2, bottom right), when the editorial composition mimics a camera jumping back into the courtyard insisting on the detail of the inmate in the straightjacket and her neighbour, now staring directly at the camera from the same crouched position.

[insert Figure 3 - FIG03.TIF]

A sequence of two images on page 67 (Fig. 3) portrays the detail of a nurse's hand holding a key on a dangling keychain and then the motion-blurred image of a nurse opening or closing a door with the key. To some extent *contra* Forgacs, these show that, if anything,

---

[80] Bertold Brecht, 'The Exception and the Rule' in Bertold Brecht, *The Jewish Wife and Other Short Plays*, ed. and trans. by Eric Bentley. (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 111.

photography has issues portraying stillness rather than movement—for which it can count on a number of established conventions, such as motion blurring. It is to portray stillness that the editors of *MDC* rely on non-photographic, cinematographic, techniques of editing and assemblage. As Campany puts it 'the shorter a film's shot the more like a photograph it gets [...] The longer the shot the more like a photograph it gets too, the continuous "stare" of the lens giving us a moving picture'.[81] Still photography cannot get any longer or shorter, except through concatenation.

4.2 Texts, Images and Readers

The text and its relationship with the images is where *MDC* parts ways with the linear narrative of the neorealist phototext and channels the *impegno*, the political commitment of the arts, towards forms closer to the postmodern production.[82] Instead of a linear narrative accompanied by visual cues, text and photography chase and strengthen each other throughout in three forms: citations from a variety of sources, poems by inmates, and graffiti. To a certain extent, these texts do constitute, as Barthes would have it, 'a parasitic message designed to connote the image'.[83] However, we cannot apply to *MDC* Berger's assertion that 'as soon as photographs are used with words, they produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion'.[84] The textual dimension in *MDC* is often either entirely framed within the iconographic message (e.g. photo of graffiti) or completely unrelated to it (e.g. several of the citations). In the former case Barthes's assertion that 'the closer the text to the image, the less it seems to connote it; caught as it were in the iconographic message'[85] holds good. In the latter, the relationship between text and image is more complicated and dodges

---

[81] Campany, p. 36.
[82] See Antonello and Mussgnug.
[83] Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', p. 25.
[84] John Berger, 'Appearances', in John Berger and John Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 91.
[85] Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', pp. 25-6.

Sontag's warning that 'captions do tend to override the evidence of our eyes'.[86] The text seems to work in concert with the image to foster the creation of an overarching meaning. Connotation is thus not entrusted to a parasitic text such as a caption, instead the reader is required to piece the visual and textual dimension together and add them up to (re)construct a continuous narrative and actively produce the meaning of the photo essay. Readers are bestowed with an ethical responsibility and become an active part of the process of signification: they are urged to action, even in the very act of reading. Photography and the assemblage of photographs in the photobook, assume the role of 'action', according to Arendt's tripartition of activities of the *vita activa*.[87] Reading a photobook such as *MDC* is not a contemplative but an active endeavour, grounded in what Azoulay defines the 'ethics of the spectator', which is based on the assumption that:

> Photographs do not speak for themselves. Alone, they do not decipher a thing. Identifying what is seen does not excuse the spectator from 'watching' the photograph, rather than looking at it, and from caring for its sense. And the sense of the photograph is subject to negotiation.[88]

> Ultimately, in *MDC*, 'the photo acts, thus making others act'.[89] *MDC* thus not only appears to work as a *détournement*, as I discussed above, but seems to 'forese[e] at its core a mature, complex and intelligent reader, ready to share the author's aesthetic and ethical responsibility'.[90] It thus anticipates one of the central characteristics of postmodern *impegno*,

---

[86] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 84.
[87] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
[88] Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), p. 27.
[89] Ibid., p. 137.
[90] Antonello and Mussgnug, p. 20.

whilst maintaining at its core the neorealist overlap of ethics and aesthetics—Patellani's urge to merge in photography 'i valori documento-bellezza'.[91]

[insert Figure 4 - FIG04.TIF]

Page 22 features a full-page photograph (Fig. 4, left), followed on the next page by a detail of some graffiti (Fig. 4, right). The photo on page 22 is a wide-angle shot dominated by a featureless foreground. As the gaze of the viewer follows this barren space towards the background it meets an inmate laying on a bench, outside of the points of strength of the composition, occupying less than a quarter of the upper part of the image, an unconventional but very eloquent strategy of composition: The empty space comes *between* the viewer and the inmate, evoking an insurmountable distance. This picture is followed by a full-page detail of some graffiti. It is a list of celestial objects, each item preceded by the W that in Italian indicates '*viva/evviva*', an exclamation of rejoicing: 'W il sole, W la luna,…'—in English something like 'Hurrah for the Sun, Hurrah for the Moon, …'. The distance society puts between itself and the 'insane', represented in the picture on the left, is here emphasised by the voice of the inmate, who expresses longing for distant objects of beauty that only the gaze can apprehend.

[insert Figure 5 - FIG05.TIF]

Page 29 (Fig. 5, right) reveals that the W graffiti is only a detail of a larger piece, featuring an angel/nurse seemingly turning into a guard, accompanied by two sentences: 'I nomi sono la vita di tutto. Non soggiogarli' and 'Gloria a voi divi del mondo'. This image is preceded by an advertisement for a toy train, which reproduces the exclamation '*Viva*' (Fig. 5, left). It says: 'Papà, Viva la Rivoluzione!', and continues with long praise of very generic values that could be loosely associated with the 1968 movements, concluding that father and

---

[91] Patellani, p. 155. For a criticism of the traditional distinction between 'the aesthetic' and 'the political' see Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination. A Political Ontology of Photography* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), pp. 29-124.

son will be able to discuss these while playing with the toy train that the father will buy his son for Christmas. Reading the whole text from left to right yields a blunt message: 'Viva la Rivoluzione!' is followed by an advertisement exploiting the values of anti-consumerism to sell a product, followed in turn by a warning written by an inmate: *non soggiogare i nomi*. It is almost a 'double' or 'counter-' *détournement*: in the advertisement consumerism appropriates and subverts anti-capitalist ideals, *MDC* 'subverts the subversion', as it were. The comment the editors convey by juxtaposing these two messages seems to be: do not subject the noun 'revolution' to a consumerist agenda; 'revolution' is not an empty slogan. The contrast is very clear in the use of the W—*Viva* (the bourgeois boy in the advertisement uses it to capture the father's attention, the inmate seems to express genuine exaltation), and in the 'needs' expressed (the boy desires a toy train, the inmate longs for the freedom to watch the sky). It is a powerful juxtaposition that nevertheless betrays one of Basaglia's strongest prejudices, as noted by Benvenuto: that some 'bisogni' are 'socialmente legittimi[i]' while 'il desiderio' as a psychological category is dismissed as a 'capriccio piccolo-borghes[e]'.[92]

The theme of 'nouns' continues on page 33, where, by means of a quote from Pirandello's play *Enrico IV*, nouns become 'labels': 'E guai a chi un bel giorno si trovi bollato da una di queste parole che tutti ripetono! Per esempio: "Pazzo!"—Per esempio, che so?—"imbecille!"'. The argument that psychiatric diagnoses become labels that are indiscriminately applied by psychiatrists to suppress the individual subjectivity of patients, here anticipated by Pirandello, is central for Basaglia and is one of the leitmotifs of anti-psychiatry in the 1960s and 1970s.[93] Madness, thus, according to both Pirandello and

---

[92] Sergio Benvenuto, 'Psichiatria e critica della tecnica. Franco Basaglia e il movimento psichiatrico anti-istituzionale in Italia'. *Psichiatria e psicoterapia*, (XIXV(3), 200), p. 195.

[93] See for instance Franco Basaglia, 'Introduzione ad *Asylums*' in Franco Basaglia, Scritti, ed. by Franca Ongaro Basaglia, Vol. 2 (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), pp. 13-46 and the vastly influential article by David Rosenhan, 'On being sane in insane places'. *Science* (179, Jan. 1973), pp. 250-258.

Basaglia, loses its revolutionary potential and is encased, reduced, rationalised into a label that can be contained and treated—something that Basaglia hopes will not happen to the word 'revolution'.

The narrative on nouns and their subjection concludes on page 45 with a poem by an inmate, who says that when the unwanted madness is smothered by the bars of the asylum the only way to surprise the 'white-coats' is to shut oneself into a *wanted* madness, a conclusion which recalls that of Pirandello's 1925 book *Uno, Nessuno e Centomila*, in which the protagonist, Vitangelo Moscarda, falls into a state of 'voluntary' madness to tear himself away from the world.

4.3 The Gaze of the Photographers

Finally, I wish to analyse the gaze of the photographers themselves, debunking the idea that it can be regarded as external, curious, or even 'classificatory', as has been suggested.

First, numerous pictures feature one of the subjects looking into the camera, at the source of the photographic gaze: even if there are some images taken from *outside* a fence, the origin of the gaze is almost inevitably signalled within the pictures themselves. Second, as the relationship between the foreground and background and the field of view suggests, it is clear that most if not all of the images were taken with wide-angle lenses. Berengo Gardin, in an interview recently granted to the author of this article, confirmed that only two focal lengths were used, 28mm and 35mm, both wide angles. Because of the wide-angle lenses, the majority of images had to be taken at a very close distance to the portrayed subjects. During the same interview, Berengo Gardin also confirmed that all the pictures were taken on rangefinder 35mm film cameras. These cameras feature an eye-level viewfinder (as opposed to the waist level viewfinder of most medium format cameras), making it difficult (albeit admittedly not impossible) to shoot without bringing the camera to the level of the eye of the

photographer, thus patently revealing that a picture is being taken and confuting the idea that the photographers' gaze was unreciprocated. Additionally, most images with a look to the camera are taken at the eye-level of the subject being photographed.

These considerations confirm, within the grammar of individual pictures, that the photographers had to be close to their subjects, they could not take a picture without their subjects noticing, and, finally, they had to adjust their own position, sometimes kneeling, to reach and meet the gaze of their subjects at their own level.

[insert Figure 6 - FIG06.TIF]

As early as page 8, at the beginning of the discussed protocinematic sequence (Fig. 2), we notice that the inmate on the right looks at the camera and the photographer is at eye-level with that gaze. The first intense and close stare an inmate casts at the camera is on page 20. The famous picture by Cerati (Fig. 6) portrays in deep chiaroscuro tones a sitting inmate intently looking into the camera, while in the background, slightly blurred and in profile, a laying inmate also seems to stare at the camera. The image is associated with a quote from a handbook for psychiatric nurses. The cited paragraph is about stings and bites, and what to do when an 'aggressive inmate' bites either another inmate or a nurse. Perhaps the *punctum* of this image lands precisely in associating such a present gaze with norms about bites: 'Could he really bite?'. Cerati remarked during an interview with Orsi that the portrayed inmate did in fact bite the photographer as soon as this picture was taken. Cerati comments: 'Il paziente mi fissa con uno sguardo molto determinato. Dopo mi è saltato addosso e mi ha morsicato una gamba e io gli ho dato ragione. Come mi permettevo di fotografare uno che non era d'accordo?'[94] This anecdotal reference is somewhat confirmed in the visual datum: the photographer must have been very close to the inmate, and must have come from above (he

---

[94] Carla Cerati in Francesca Orsi, *Il ritratto della follia. La fotografia psichiatrica in Italia dal 1850 al 2000*. Tesi di Laurea. (Università La Sapienza di Roma, 2008), p. 176.

looks upwards, the framing is slightly *plongée*). Cerati admits to the violation of the inmates'

space, which, as we have seen is a negotiated space, according to Basaglia. Within the frame

this violation is signalled if not by the relatively calm expression of the foreground inmate,

then at least by the smirk of the inmate in the background.

[insert Figure 7 - FIG07.TIF]

Cerati's 'mistake' is not repeated (at least within the visual narrative in *MDC*). For

instance, the four pictures on pages 34 (Fig. 7, left) and 35 (Fig. 7, right) are all taken at eye-

level with the subjects, including the ones on page 34, which are images of the same subject

as Figure 6.

[insert Figure 8 - FIG08.TIF]

One of the most emblematic images in *MDC*, the inmate behind the fence on page 59

(Fig. 8), is clearly shot at the level of the subject's eyes and the subject is looking into

camera; hence, even if this shot was taken from *outside* of the fence, the closeness to the

subject and the exchange of gazes between photographer and photographed reveal their co-

presence and the participation of the photographer in the scene.

[insert Figure 9 - FIG09.TIF]

Perhaps one of the most intense visual narratives is established at page 24, continuing

on from the spread on 'distance' (Fig. 4) with a quote from Nizan's 1931 *Aden Arabie*: 'i

guardiani di prigione […] hanno delle maschere quando si guardano negli specchi e non

riconoscono la loro brutta cera dietro la cartapesta dorata. Ma noi, noi le maschere le

ignoriamo'.[95] The quote is associated with a picture (Fig. 9) that had nothing to do with the

asylum: it features a very motion-blurred image of a *celerino* (riot police officer) in Piazza

San Marco, Venice. As Berengo Gardin remembers in an interview,[96] the picture was taken

---

[95] Paul Nizan in Basaglia and Ongaro, p. 24.
[96] Gianni Berengo Gardin in Giampiero D'Angeli, *Fotografia Italiana. Gianni Berengo Gardin*. (Bologna: Giart, 2009), 17'39"–18'20".

during a protest, he was mistaken for a protester, and the *celerino* attacked him with the truncheon (visible top right), which broke Berengo Gardin's finger right after he took the shot: one can hardly think of a higher level of participation of the photographer in the photographed scene. Police officers and other enforcers of public order, a category in which Basaglia also places psychiatrists, are instruments of repression of the dominant class— echoing Gramsci, Basaglia calls them 'funzionari del consenso', who

> Hanno abitualmente il compito di assicurare legalmente la disciplina di quei gruppi che non "consentono, né attivamente né passivamente […] il tecnico ha a che fare con problemi di ordine pubblico […] anche se mascherat[i] dalle teorie scientifiche che giustificano i provvedimenti pratici con cui vi si risponde.[97]

[insert Figure 10 - FIG10.TIF]

The image is followed by a much-discussed spread that forces the reader to compare two group pictures: on the left a group of inmates in the courtyard of the asylum (Fig. 10, left), all in uniform: some laying on the floor, others crouched, some standing with their head bowed; on the right a bourgeois *soirée* (Fig. 10, right) featuring a large sofa, with a group of elegantly dressed youngsters, sipping drinks and smoking. Notably, while in the image of the asylum courtyard at least one inmate looks to the camera, in the image of the bourgeois gathering no one seems to notice the photographer, a signal that the photographer is more 'external' and his gaze is more 'unreciprocated' in the bourgeois living room than in the asylum.

A citation from Weiss's *Marat/Sade* captions the *soirée*: Columier interrupts the play and says: 'Sono costretto a protestare / Qui eravamo d'accordo di tagliare'.[98] This spread reveals a complex narrative, which begins at least with the spread on distance (Fig. 4):

---

[97] Franco Basaglia, 'Crimini di pace' in Franco Basaglia, *Scritti*, ed. by Franca Ongaro Basaglia, Vol. 2 (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), p. 239.
[98] Weiss in Basaglia and Ongaro, p. 27.

distance between society and the insane is part of the system of repression, which is enforced by 'functionaries' who administer violence—among them psychiatrists themselves, according to Basaglia—but also guards, nurses, police officers, etc. These administrators of violence enforce repression and ensure distance between sane and insane to preserve the bourgeois order—a very Foucauldian narrative—that is in fact revealed in the comparison spread. But this should not have been revealed: *here we agreed to cut*. The point of origin of institutional psychiatry as an instrument of repression must remain *concealed*, in cinematic terms we could say that we need to *cut* before the film rolls to that frame. But the editors of *MDC* do not cut, and continue to roll the 'film' shot by Cerati and Berengo Gardin in order for it to uncover, unmask. Not incidentally this spread continues with the advertisement for a toy train and the graffiti on the importance of nouns: only a revolution can enforce changes, but only if it is a 'proper' revolution, and not an empty slogan, again used to *mask* something else (such as a consumerist purpose, as it was the case with the advertisement).

The sequence of these spreads is central to *MDC* because it allows the strategy of *smascheramento* that is the beginning of the revolution to very clearly emerge. It is also central to clarify that the gaze of the photographers is an integral part of this strategy. Far from being voyeurs, Cerati and Berengo Gardin enter the enclosed walls of the asylum to deploy the strategy of *smascheramento* through their photographic eye.

These considerations unravel the extent to which in *MDC* narrator, photographer and reader/observer are all directly involved in the construction of the overarching narrative: they must participate to the construction of meaning. This is the ultimate emergence of the ethical stance, the *impegno* in *MDC*: to foster a 'thick relationship' in Margalit terms, a 'passional and relational' engagement between photographer, narrator, reader and the photographed

subject, not based on superficial and 'abstract norms'.[99] It is the creation of an ethical stance of unmasking, channelled in a fragmented and multimedial narration, rather than a monolithic morality conveyed in the linear narrative of realism; a novel engagement with a 'concealed' reality which draws *MDC* very close to the forms of postmodern *impegno*.[100]

5. *Morire di Classe*: Neorealism, Concerned Photography, Postmodernism

In conclusion, a close reading of *MDC* reveals its transitional and hybrid nature. In it, photographs and their assemblage do not reflect the cold distance of a document, nor the spectacularisation of a curious voyeuristic (and perhaps even morbid) insight into a closed world. The entire photobook is moved by the *impegno*, by a visual strategy of political concern and commitment. The *concerned* dimension of *MDC* could be summarised in the definition of a gaze of *unmasking*, the political strategy that Basaglia, through *MDC*, among other initiatives, deployed at the beginning of the anti-institutional revolution in Italian psychiatry. This gaze has several characteristic, as I have shown: it is a protocinematic gaze that develops complex visual and textual narratives, it is a participating and involved gaze that objectifies to subjectify—in a very Sartrian way, and that makes the photographer part of the visual narrative and the reader an active part of the process of creation. These characteristics partake of the legacy of neorealist photography, which had already experimented with bringing cinema to paper, in order to 'narrativise' still photography in the phototext, and proposed a straight but also intimate and subjective photographic take on reality. However, *MDC* moves substantially beyond the neorealist lesson, paving the way for the Italian *concerned* photography, and anticipating forms of commitment that will reach maturity only decades later, during the years of the Italian postmodern *impegno*. It does so

---

[99] Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 7.
[100] Antonello and Mussgnug, p. 12.

primarily by deploying a non-linear and very fragmented narrative, the reconstruction of which becomes the responsibility of the reader/spectator. This is an ethical responsibility, what Azoulay refers to as the 'ethics of the spectator', a call to action towards the reader that is embedded in the very assemblage of photos and, ultimately, in the unprecedented structure of *MDC* itself. Readers become part of the process of signification rather than being imparted a, captioned, moral lesson and thus become active part of the ethical, political and aesthetic project of the authors themselves.