Photography as Power
Photography as Power:

*Dominance and Resistance through the Italian Lens*

Edited by
Marco Andreani and Nicoletta Pazzaglia
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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to several people and institutions that contributed to the realization of the present work. First of all, a special thank goes to our contributors for having accepted to be part of this collection and for the patience they put into following the steps of the publication process. We are grateful to Marco Purpura from U.C. Berkeley for collaborating to the initial phases of this project and organizing with us the photography panels for the American Association of Italian Studies Annual Conference in Zurich, 2015—from which this project originated.

We would like to express our sincerest appreciation to Kevin Regan-Maglione from the University of Oregon for the linguistic editing of the manuscript and to Silvia Milani for helping us with the final editing and formatting of the present volume. A special thank goes to Nicola Carnerlenghi from Dartmouth College and The Italian Art Society for organizing with us the four panels on Photography (two on photography and power and two on photography and writing) for the American Association of Italian Studies Annual Conference in Zurich, 2015. We also thank the American Association of Italian Studies for hosting our panels in Zurich.

We would like to thank Nicoletta Leonardi from the University of Turin for the precious suggestions and help she offered throughout these years. We express profound gratitude to David Forgacs from New York University for accepting to write the introduction of the present book.

We would like to thank all institutions and photographers who granted us permission to publish their photographs: Museo di antropologia criminale “Cesare Lombroso,” Turin; Ospedale psichiatrico San Lazzaro, Reggio Emilia; Ospedale psichiatrico provinciale di San Clemente, Venice; Polo Archivistico, Reggio Emilia; Istituto per la storia del risorgimento Italiano, Rome; Istituto Luce-Cinecittà, Rome; Istituto nazionale per la storia del movimento di liberazione in Italia (INSMLI), Milan; Fototeca Istoreco, Reggio Emilia; CRAF - Centro di ricerca e archiviazione della fotografia, Spilimbergo; Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna; Alinari; Mario Cresci; Letizia Battaglia; and Tano D’Amico.

We express extreme appreciation to the Institutions who helped us funding this project. In particular we thank the Italian Art Society for awarding us a “Samuel H. Kress Foundation Travel Grant” and the
Department of Romance Languages at the University of Oregon for a “James T. and Mary Alice Wetzel Graduate Scholarship” that allowed the collection of archival material.
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This book is the result of ideas ensuing from two panel discussions on the relationship between photography and power in Italy which we organised, in collaboration with Marco Purpura and the Italian Art Society, at the American Association of Italian Studies Annual Conference in Zurich in May 2014. These panels included talks given by various American and Italian speakers. Given the wide range of interesting points which emerged during these discussions we soon realised that it would be worth taking things further by exploring such themes via an in-depth publication.

This book joins a series of books embracing the renewed interest in photography in the field of Italian Studies (Hill and Minghelli 2014; Alù and Pedri 2015), bearing witness both to the wealth of material via which the history of Italian photography has been disseminated and to the presence of many fields of research which at times have barely been explored. *Photography as Power* aims to join together the work of photography historians, experts in Media Studies and in Italian film and literature, in a variety of articles touching on fields ranging from *fin-de-siècle* positive sciences to the First World War, from the Fascist regime to the Resistance, from the 1960's to the Years of Lead, and up to and including the 1990's and the political rise of Silvio Berlusconi. While by no means claiming to be exhaustive, this book hopes to tackle various related points of view so as to guide non-Italian readers offering a versatile yet practical tool with which to approach some of Italy's key moments in culture and history, all of which can be re-visited here via an analysis of the crucial role played by the photographic image during each of these moments. In particular, the articles in this book explore the dual role of photography which can be seen both as an instrument of power, in the hands of those controlling the centres for production and dissemination of knowledge and information, and as a tool for resistance and for the critical
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analysis of the representations promoted by the dominant centres of power.

Via a careful reconstruction of the aims and communication strategies of the various commissioning bodies, as well as their modes of communication set against the historical, social and cultural contexts of the production and dissemination of the photos in question, the writers bring to light the ideologies, vested interests, and blurring of truths in agendas hiding behind the apparently incontrovertible truth of the photographic document. For it cannot be denied that a great part of the power of the photograph—by virtue of the mechanical and chemical process at the heart of its production with no intervention from Man—derives from “our implicit faith in the truth of a photographic record”, even where we find ourselves viewing subjects that have clearly been “misrepresented, distorted, even faked” (1938, 50-1), as Beaumont Newhall writes. Photography “almeno agli occhi della *doxa* e del senso comune, non può mentire”, adds Philippe Dubois (at least in the view of *doxa* and public opinion, is not *able to lie*; 1996, 26, emphasis in original). Yet it is equally undeniable that even the most anonymous photograph from a stylistic and formal point of view is still the result of the arbitrary choice of a fragment removed from the context of time and space, cut via the frame determined and in equal measure conditioned by a subjective point of view. Viewed in this light, photography is by definition partial and hence can lend itself to any attempt to blur the lines or mislead when representing reality. Judith Butler—whose writings together with those of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Susan Sontag and John Tagg are key points of reference in this book when it comes to questions of power and representation—argues that photography is a “structuring scene of interpretation” (Butler 2009, 67), meaning that the ways in which subjects are framed create systems of perception within which recognition occurs: “The ‘how’ not only organizes the image, but works to organize our perception and thinking as well” (71). For it is the dual presence of both of these aspects—the ever partial yet subjective nature of the photograph combined with its impersonal ability to automatically reproduce reality—which enables photography to be put to use as a vehicle for such biased messages of incontrovertible truth.

Taking these suggestions as a starting point the essays in this book attempt to address a series of questions. For example, how did late nineteenth century medical and social scientists, including the famous anthropologist and criminologist Cesare Lombroso, use photographs in support of their hypotheses? Why was it that in the First World War the Italian state put its faith in the use of photography to gain credence with
members of the general public, publishing carefully reassuring images of a war seemingly free from acts of atrocity? What propaganda strategies led to photographic images becoming the tool of choice legitimising the power and imperialistic ambitions of Benito Mussolini? Later on, in what way did the 1960's artist Mario Cresci, by contrast, use photography as the ideal weapon to deconstruct the establishment, as a tool with which to set in motion processes of participatory democracy? How was it that photography was used as a form of counter-power and counter-information running against the established order and the main organs of the press during the 1970's, or as an act of provocation and of rebellion against the socio-political system of the Italy in the 1990's?

The answers to this series of questions use an alternative method to the traditional approach of photography historians discussing photography as art in Italy. Such writings were often highly conditioned by Benedetto Croce's authorial take on aesthetics, and generally focussed on a series of great photographers selected solely on the basis of the aesthetic value attributed to their work. The rich array of illustrations to be found in this edition, however, are mainly made up of photo-reportage pictures taken by the likes of Tano D'Amico or Letizia Battaglia, and from the sociological or anthropological photos taken by Mario Cresci in Basilicata or, for the most part, from archive images of pictures taken by unknown or non-professional photographers (soldiers, scientists), anonymous workers and photographic companies. The essays in this current book are perfectly in line with research in Italy that, from the end of the 1970's, began to critically question the dominant ideals of Croce's historiographic approach. Critics have since begun to focus their attention on the photographic image not so much as a work of art resulting from a disinterested eye, but as one of the most oft-used tools of communication in the contemporary world, where images are used with specific practical aims in political, propagandistic, scientific or social fields, as the result of carefully chosen plans and strategies which can be traced to exact moments set in each given historical and social context.

For it is within this vein of thought that it is also possible to trace literature that looks at the specific relationship between photography and power in Italy, mostly covering interesting yet scattered contributions, often circumscribed to specific historical areas and periods. By keeping only to the most relevant key texts, referring readers to the specific bibliographies in each chapter of this book, it can be seen that some ideas were already to be found here and there in some of the best-known books on photography published in Italy during the second half of the 1970's (Gilardi 1978; Vaccari 1979, 29-37; Bollati 1979; Bertelli 1979, 137-46
and 169-83). From the start of the 1980's Adolfo Mignemi carried out various studies looking the archives containing the photographic images created for purposes of propaganda under the Fascist regime and the Resistance (Mignemi 1982, 1995a and 1995b; De Luna and Mignemi 1997; Mignemi and Solaro 2005). Likewise, it is also possible to see similar findings when it comes to the relationship between power and photography in the research of Uliano Lucas on the history of photo-journalism in Italy, above all when looking at his work regarding the in-depth visual information that was so often "denied" as a result of political conditioning or in keeping with market demand from publishers (Bizziccari and Lucas 1981; Lucas 2006; Agliani and Lucas 2015).

Among the most extensive treatises on this theme are two books on this subject worth mentioning—*Il potere da Giolitti a Mussoni 1900-1945* (Power from Giolitti to Mussoni 1900-1945) and *Il potere da De Gasperi a Berlusconi 1945-2000* (Power from De Gasperi to Berlusconi 1945-2000)—which make up the first of three volumes on *L'Italia del Novecento: Le fotografie e la storia* (Twentieth Century Italy: The Photographs and History) (2005), edited by Luca Criscenti, Gabriele D'Autilia and Giovanni De Luna. The Italian State is central in these books together with other political figures all examined via the way in which they used photographs to represent themselves, society, and various historical events, so as to disseminate the representation of a national identity which was created as much by what was removed from sight as by what was highlighted, or shown only partially or with a biased leaning. Finally, the writings of David Forgacs are of particular interest in that they examine the relationships between Italy's cultural industries and the political and economic powers (1990) and, above all, the role played by photography in within the one-directional and generally irreversible relationships of power—on which many of the processes of representation are founded, as well as the exclusion of those places and social groups which are deemed to be marginal compared with those placed centrally when building a sense of the Italian identity (2014).

In conclusion, *Photography as Power* is an attempt to highlight the various declinations of the photographic device from the moment that it has been used as a tool of power in the specific context of Italy's situation. It constitutes above all an invitation to pursue a line of research which, as Forgacs wrote in his introduction, demonstrates "the current vitality of the history of photography as a means for enhancing our understanding of the social, cultural and political history of Italy".
Notes

1 Both published by the University of Toronto Press, these two volumes gather contributions by researchers of various different nationalities on the subject of the relationship between photography and literature, the national identity, culture and the idea of modernity in Italy.

2 In these instances the main reference point is Newhall's history of photography published by in 1949, which was based on the concept of photography as "un'unica grande categoria metastorica" (a singularly unique meta-historical category) where the "capolavori dell'arte fotografica" (great works of art in photography) were all gathered together (Russo 2011, 218).

3 For the development and limits of photographic historiography in Italy see Russo 2011 (185-234).
Bibliography


The relation between photography and power operates on several different levels. The taking of a photograph is itself an act across which power relations often play out. In the police photograph of an arrested suspect, the photograph of a patient in a mental institution, the ethnographic photograph of an indigenous person taken in the field or in a studio, the magazine cover of a naked or partially dressed woman, or the photograph of a poor urban area taken for a slum clearance programme, the photographer has the power, or embodies the power of the person or institution that commissioned the photograph, to fix the subjects in a precise pose, objectify them in the frame and attach a set of predetermined meanings to their image.

The circulation of photographs in public also involves power of one kind or another: the power of advertising images to seduce and to persuade viewers to buy, of election images to prettify a candidate, vilify a rival or create a scare about an issue, of pictures of beautiful but abject 'poster children' to attract donations to a humanitarian charity while reinforcing the idea that those children, and the countries they live in, are dependent on the benevolence of rich countries.

In the early years of photography the fact of possessing or not possessing a camera, and of having or lacking the means to reproduce and distribute a photograph, were themselves relations of power, embedded in larger power relations. The anthropologist could 'capture' an image of an indigenous person in a British or French colony and take it home for the edification of an audience at a geographical society in London or Paris, but the indigenous person could not reciprocate by capturing and sharing an image of the anthropologist. Those power relations were also spatial relations, intrinsic to the structure of European imperialist domination, and were not reversible. Even an everyday photograph taken within a family can have oppressive power relations embedded in it. A parent can coax an
unhappy child to 'be good' and smile for the camera. A group photograph of smiling guests at an arranged wedding ceremony can hide the coercive relations behind the marriage contract.

But the power relations in and around photography can also work in the opposite direction. A photographer may be invited to record an injustice or atrocity to help draw public attention to it. This was the case of the photographs of mutilated Congolese adults and children taken by foreign photographers in 1905 and 1906, which helped prove to the rest of the world the atrocities committed in King Leopold's Congo Free State. Or a photograph taken for one purpose can be appropriated and its meaning can be reversed. This is what happened when some of the lynching photographs printed by white Americans as mementoes of their power were republished in the black American press. The photograph of two young black men hanging from a tree in Marion, Indiana, with a large crowd of white people peering or smiling at the camera, was first published on the front page of a local newspaper on 8 August 1930 under the headline "Marion is quiet after double lynching". It was republished two months later in the black newspaper *Crisis* with an ironic caption, "Civilization in the United States, 1930", which reversed its first meaning. No longer a record of an act of popular justice that had pacified an angry white community, the photograph now exposed the pretence of civilisation upheld by that same community. Twenty-five years later, David Jackson's photographs of the horribly mutilated face of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy lynched in Mississippi in 1955, had an even greater impact. It was Emmett's mother, Mamie Till Bradley, who had invited Jackson to take the photographs of her son laid out in the morgue. They were published in Jet and other black American magazines and then in a four-page spread in *Life*, giving the case national visibility, searing the violence of the lynching into the white liberal conscience and helping galvanise the civil rights movement. In all these cases photography was used to enable historically disempowered subjects to challenge a prevailing power structure.

Each of the essays in this book deals with a different aspect of the relations between photography and power in Italy. Taken together, they constitute the most comprehensive treatment of this topic in any language. The book covers the whole age of the photograph as a technology and a medium, from the mid nineteenth century to the digital images of today. The first Italian photographs were taken in 1839 in Turin, shortly after the daguerreotype process was launched in Paris. There are extant calotypes of shelled buildings in Rome following the defeat of the short-lived Republic in 1849, a daguerreotype of Garibaldi taken in 1851, and a pair of stereoscopic photographs of the bodies of soldiers killed in the Battle of
Melegnano in 1859, all before Italy became a unified nation in 1861. From then on, Italy followed a similar trajectory to that of other modern industrializing countries in its adoption of photography, both technologically and in the proliferation of its social uses and users. These included studio portraiture, military and police photography, anthropological and medical documentation, fine art, fashion, advertising, journalism, and, not least, millions of personal and family photographs, from those taken on the first affordable amateur cameras (Kodak opened its Italian subsidiary in 1905) to those taken today on smartphones that can be shared almost immediately with one's followers on social media.

At the same time, there are a number of peculiarities of Italy's history as a nation-state that have made the relations between photography and power within it distinctive. In my book *Italy's Margins* (2014) I drew attention to the important role played since the late nineteenth century by photography, as well as by writing and later by film and television, in producing stereotypes of the Italian nation as containing primitive or backward areas and people, who were thereby symbolically displaced outside its civilised core. These 'marginalised' people lived in poor and disease-ridden peripheries of Italy's cities, in its colonies overseas, in rural areas of the south of the country, in mental asylums, in 'nomad camps'. In a separate essay I argued that similar kinds of visual marginalisation were at work in news photographs and television pictures of migrants and asylum seekers arriving in Italy from various countries of origin in the global south. I sought to demonstrate how, in this way, photography and visual media in Italy played an important role as an agent of political and ideological power, forming widely accepted ideas about the shape and structure of the nation. I also showed how photographs have been used, albeit less frequently, to challenge and counter those prevailing ideas.

There are several other aspects of Italy's history that have distinctively shaped the relations in it between photography and power. Three of them are worth highlighting here, since they are directly addressed in this book. The first is the long tenure in power, from 1922 to 1943, of a Fascist government, the first of its kind to emerge in the world, which sought to impose its own propaganda images and restrict the circulation of images it considered undesirable. The role of photography in Fascist propaganda, from the 1932 Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution to illustrated magazines, is examined in detail by Marco Andreani in his chapter. Benedetta Guerzoni, drawing on the photographs and written directives in the archive of Gino Cigarini, a photographer and movie camera operator embedded with the Italian army during Italy's war of colonial aggression in Ethiopia in 1935-36, reconstructs the assiduous care taken by the
regime to control the work of the army's photographic teams. Martina Caruso's chapter shows, by contrast, how photographs taken in or about the antifascist Resistance in 1943-45 often used a set of visual codes that directly opposed the image of the virile Fascist hero. The antifascist was often portrayed as a heroic martyr, as a paradoxically 'empowered victim'.

The second aspect is the intensity and duration of collective protests in the 1960s and 1970s against the political and economic system then in place in Italy, and the often ferocious backlash against those protests by parts of the Italian state, sometimes in collusion with foreign powers. Nicoletta Leonardi examines the political photography of Mario Cresci from those years, which used various techniques of display, including montage and multiples of the same image, to attack figures of power or create solidarity with demonstrators, as well as his photo-activism in the economically depressed areas of Italy's south. Christian Uva's chapter looks at some of the ways in which photographs, as well as video and film, were enlisted during the 1970s in the service of 'counter-power' by activists in protest movements.

The third aspect is the entrenched presence in certain parts of Italy of organised crime, sometimes protected by the state, at other times in conflict with it. Luana Ciavola's chapter looks, among other things, at Letizia Battaglia's photographs of victims of mafia killings in Sicily in the 1980s, and reminds us of their role in raising public awareness of the violence and power of the mafia and in helping build a grassroots movement against it and those corrupt politicians who protected it.

All the other chapters in this book have important things to say about photography and power in Italy and they all draw on original research. Nicoletta Pazzaglia examines the convergence between police and medical photographs taken in the late nineteenth century. She pays particular attention to photographs of women held in mental institutions or detained by police, where the convention of a frontal portrait, shot against a bare background, decontextualises, deindividualises and defeminises the woman, turning her into a generic criminal or psychiatric 'type'. Maria Grazia Lolla explores the connections between photography and statistics in nineteenth century Italy and shows that, although photographs were supposed to capture each individual's unique identity, they were often used in practice to represent statistical 'averages' rather than individuals. Gabriele D'Autilia, examining photographs taken during the First World War, which Italy engaged in from 1915 to 1918, argues that, despite military censorship, many photographs marked an abrupt break with preceding conventions of visual representation by showing a shocking reality, from the traumatised look on combatants' faces to landscapes
devastated by bombardment. Pasquale Verdicchio argues that in modern photographs of political personalities, from Benito Mussolini to Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump, it is the person, not the issues they represent, that is the essential message conveyed.

Overall, these chapters demonstrate the current vitality of the history of photography as a means for enhancing our understanding of the social, cultural and political history of Italy. They also show the wide variety of research methods that are being used today in working with photographs as historical sources. Until very recently, hardly any historians took photography seriously as a field of study in its own right. At most, they used photographs in a book or an article to illustrate something that they had already described in writing, as visual supplements to their written text. Now, instead, more historians, and not just cultural historians, recognise that photographs are primary sources and objects of study in themselves. Every photograph is always taken or commissioned by someone for some purpose. The relations between the photographer and his or her subject, and the reproduction and circulation of a photograph, can sometimes be reconstructed from contemporary sources, and when they cannot, they may sometimes be inferred by comparison with similar examples. The present book shows this new history of photography at work, shining a light on the multiple interconnections between photography and power in modern Italy.
CHAPTER I

A BODY TO FEAR: REPRESENTABILITY, RECOGNITION AND THE MAKING OF THE CRIMINAL WOMAN

NICOLETTA PAZZAGLIA

Introduction

The two photographs below belong to the collection of Museo di antropologia criminale Cesare Lombroso (Cesare Lombroso Museum of Criminal Anthropology) in Turin and depict a fin-de-siècle Russian criminal woman (see Figure 1.1) and a mad woman from the Voghera asylum in Italy (see Figure 1.2). A viewer familiar with paintings of the period can detect the social status of the mental patient from the Voghera asylum. The simple clothing and the foulard recall images of women peasants, especially as they were depicted in paintings of the Macchiaioli school, important at the time. Aside from a cloth covering the woman's hands—that is clearly unusual—the position of both bodies appears to be identical to that of traditional portraits of sane women. What made these women criminals at all? Italian anthropologist and criminologist Cesare Lombroso, although not a photographer himself, extensively used photography in his studies on criminality.¹ Photography was used—Allan Sekula suggests—to establish and delimit "the terrain of the other" (1992, 7), defining the typology of deviance and social pathology.² Still, in what sense is this otherness delimited in these portraits and why would a nineteenth century spectator perceive these women as fearsome and dangerous? This essay explores the ways in which the notion of female deviancy and criminality was constructed in fin-de-siècle photographic portraits of women considered degenerate by contemporary society that include convicted women and the mentally ill.
In my analysis, I pay particular attention to the *mise-en-scène*. First introduced in 1858 by British psychiatrist H. W. Diamond, this specific *mise-en-scène* was employed in the representation of the mentally ill. The unanimous opinion among critics is that the empty background and the use of the frontal portrait format served to put emphasis on facial expressions. Didi-Huberman, for example, suggests that the prominence given to facial expressions—the so-called *facies*—was employed to crystallise each mental illness into a specific type (2003, 48). The movement of the soul, made visible through the face, created a direct link to brain alterations, considered as the origin of mental disorders (49). Later on, with Alphonse
Bertillon's invention of the mug shot in the early 1880s, this exact *mise-en-scène* was also adopted and standardised within criminal and police photography. With Bertillon's mug shot, the criminal's body found its public visibility; it became a body that could be classified, studied and most importantly it became a body that could be recognised as the dangerous and fearful figure of the criminal. The collaboration between police photography and periodical press allowed a widespread circulation of these portraits. Mug shots of criminals were one of the first photographs to be published in periodicals, newspapers and magazines and the public, especially working class, was an avid audience for these portraits (Gilardi 2003, 55).

![Figure 1.2 Davide Cicala. Portrait of a madwoman, Voghera asylum, 1880s. © Museo di antropologia criminale "Cesare Lombroso", Università di Torino.](image)
Cesare Lombroso’s studies became a crucial source of inspiration in Bertillon’s formulation of the mug shot. Lombroso claimed that criminal behaviour could be detected in the body of the ‘born’ criminal through a series of physical anomalies—which he called *stigmata*—that were marks of degeneracy transmitted from generation to generation. In line with Lombroso’s studies, physical features such as ears, eyes, the jaw and so on (also known as connotations) along with the gaze were considered degenerative traits and constituted essential features in the representation of the criminal body. While *stigmata*, according to Lombroso, were highly prominent in male criminals, they were not as evident in convicted women. In *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale* (*The Criminal Woman, the Prostitute and the Normal Woman*) (1893) Lombroso argued that women, because of their inferior nature, were also less prone to become criminals and for this reason had less visible physical anomalies. The "inessential" nature of women—to borrow Simone De Beauvoir’s expression—and her role as "other" (2010, 11) in a male-dominated world, also made them inessential within the field of criminality. If criminality is primarily inscribed in the male physiognomy, how is it possible to visually represent criminality in portraits of degenerate women?

In what follows, I explore the role of the *mise-en-scène* in creating systems of perception and fields of recognisability. I draw on Judith Butler’s studies on precarious life and grievability she developed in *Frames of War* (2009). In this book, Butler argues that "the apprehension of precarious life" can only take place in the face of a life whose loss would matter. Grievability—as the presupposition of a life that matters—"precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life" (23). The philosopher proposes a ‘social ontology’ of the subject, meaning that the intelligibility of the subject is politically constituted: "The 'frames' that work to differentiate grievability—the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot (or that produce lives across a continuum of life)—not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject" (3). A subject, in order to be recognised as such, must constantly be subjected to the normative frameworks. Normative frameworks in Butler’s analysis produce the field of representability. Representability is thus *prior* to the field of recognisability; this implies that recognition cannot take place outside the system of perception.

In the chapter "Photography and the Ethic of Torture" Butler investigates the role of photography in creating the field of perception. Butler argues that photography is "a structuring scene of interpretation":

We do not have to be supplied with a caption of a narrative in order to understand that a political background is being explicitly formulated and
renewed through and by the frame, that the frame functions not only as a boundary to the image, but as structuring the image itself [. . .] The 'how' not only organizes the image, but works to organize our perception of thinking as well. (71)

The philosopher suggests that to understand the field of representability one must consider not just its content, but what is left outside: "we cannot understand the field of representability simply by examining its explicit contents, since it is constituted fundamentally by what is left outside, maintained outside the frame within which representations appear" (72). Butler argues that what is left outside, what we do not see inside the frame, is constitutive of the frame itself.

In line with Butler's theories, I show how the mise-en-scène in these photographs functions as a decontextualizing process through which representations of women considered degenerate exceed traditional depictions of femininity. I argue that a specific affective response was expected of the fin-de-siècle viewer to justify and maintain power structures and normativity. The first part of this essay explores the development of degeneracy theories, from Benedict-August Morel and Cesare Lombroso to Max Simon Nordau. The notion of degeneracy is key to understanding the link between medical and legal discourses, a link that was at the foundation of the criminalisation of madness in fin-de-siècle society. I then analyse the social construction of female deviancy in post-Unification Italian society by comparing portraits of ‘sane’ women by Alinari brothers with photographs of degenerate women in the Lombroso archive in Turin and photographic portraits of mad women from the San Clemente and San Lazzaro asylums in Venice and Reggio Emilia. I investigate the viewer's emotional response to mechanisms of de-familiarisation and misrecognition created by the mise-en-scène. In the final part I set portraits of degenerate women in parallel with Giovanni Verga's representation of Sister Agata in Storia di una capinera (Sparrow: The Story of a Songbird) (1871) in order to further explore the politics of affect in the mise-en-scène. In the depiction of Sister Agata's confinement into the convent's lunatic cell, Verga destabilises frames of perception and recognisability and creates a counter-discourse to hegemonic power that is profoundly rooted in the viewer's emotional response.

Degeneracy Theories

Degeneracy theories spread throughout Europe during the fin-de-siècle. A key turning point in the study of mental disorders was Benedict-Augustine Morel whose Traité des Dégénérescences (Treatise on