

THE IMAGE OF CONTEMPORARY ITALY: AN INCOMPLETE INVESTIGATION

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Abstract

Photojournalism, the acute expression of democracy, has been overlooked in dominant accounts of photographic history in Italy, where rather the project of neorealism has been engaged within accounts of the modernization of the country in the post-war. As a consequence, photography and the history of the nation have existed together in Italy in a way that their differences and specificities have been difficult to narrate.

This paper addresses the role of contemporary photography in Italy as witness, focusing a discussion beyond the terrain of the 'concerned' photography of neorealism. It explores instead the ephemeral image of photojournalism – the reportage of crime and corruption, murders and missing persons, stories marked by lies, half-truths and inconclusive trials, the stuff that Italian newspapers and television broadcasts call *la cronaca nera*, the obscure chronicles of coercion and conspiracy that reflect the failures of a modern state in a vortex into which the most private and public figures are drawn.

No other visual form of this period has the ability of photojournalism to narrate the underside of Italian society and the demise of the economic miracle of the post-war. Through its ongoing testimony of organized crime, the 'years of lead (bullets)', the 'strategy of tension' and the political compromises that led to the 'clean hands' investigation into widespread political corruption of the 1990s, *la cronaca nera* has produced its own conflicted account of modern Italy in an image of evil manipulated by unseen forces. It is an account ripe with passion and shame, a crisis of legitimacy narrated in a fusion of forensic science and crime mystery, where the unique certainty is the photograph as a document that fragments meaning and refuses historical closure.

Keywords: photography, history, Italy, photojournalism, documentation, history of photography