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Dissemination of picture copies through different archives: the visual power of Cesare Battisti's death

Photographs are documents and as such are used to show a message and in particular a visual message. The study of this typology of documents could highlight the archivists' power concept in the selection of memory, already unanimously affirmed. In fact, postcards of historical occurrences, especially at the beginning of their circulation, were replicated identically from photos and in large amounts, then preserved, and therefore not destroyed by archivists. Although from an archival point of view identical pictures are copies, several files exactly alike are often preserved in different archives. The aim of this article is to try to recognize that the preservation of images, like records, is the result of an archivist's personal selection. This paper analyzes a sample case study, the archiving of pictures related to irredentist Cesare Battisti's death in Trento on July 12, 1916.

Introduction

The paper is going to explore the capability to understand a historical event or a cultural context thanks to images. In fact, each visual item is able to describe a range of different stories but this potential ability is strictly connected with the archiving and cataloging procedures with which it is recorded.

The introduction of the negative to positive process in the photographic technology, as a result of William Fox Talbot invention in 1841, transformed the photographic image from being a unique item to one that was reproducible¹. This epoch-making improvement in the photographic practice engendered, now as then, reflections during archival work because it caused confusion in diplomatics basic words, like "original" and "copy".

In diplomatics - namely the discipline that studies the structure of documents - the concept of original, very "dear" to archivists, collides with photographic objects since this terminology is applicable to a picture in a different way than other forms of documents or artifacts. In fact, as Australian archivist Joanna Sassoon clarified, «in technical and photographic terms, the negative is the original because it is the medium which captures what is in front of the lens at the moment of exposure»². On the contrary, in diplomatics terms, the negative is only a draft because it is not the final print³.

What is the right interpretation that an archivist must adopt during the archiving activities? How to define the positive, namely the most important item in the photographic process? How to respond to the presence of more positives, given the possibility of countless copies made from the same picture, both from

negative and positive ones?

A “purist” archivist could find answers to these questions through drawing a *stemma codicum* that allows to view the relationship between draft, original, copy in the form of original, imitative copy, pseudo-original or multi originals and so on. Such a tree chart shows the distinction between an original document and the others, with the purpose of determining the degree of authority of the document under examination⁴.

The presence of the original, for the diplomatics science, is the prerequisite to determine whether the document is authentic⁵. But for philosopher Walter Benjamin the impossibility to identify an authentic *unicum* in the reproducible photographs is obvious. Thus, he wrote: «from a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the authentic print makes no sense»⁶.

In fact, as the literary critic John Berger stated, «the very principle of photography is that the resulting image is not unique, but on the contrary infinitely reproducible»⁷.

The possibility of the photographic technique to reproduce images in a mechanical way is a reason behind the reflection on the dissemination of pictures in various archives, which is here examined.

The case study here showed could clarify some challenges faced daily by an archivist in a photographic, governmental as well as private archive, when trying to identify a picture and discover its history, often more complex than after a first look. In fact, the case - which will be introduced in the second part of this work - highlights that Battisti’s last instants were photographed from a multitude of points of view by professional and regular people, who immediately realized to be part of a historical moment. Consequently, this particular historical circumstance caused a lot of copies to be spread throughout several countries. Furthermore, the pictures were manipulated with different purposes and used in political contexts, often diametrically opposed.

The power of dissemination of visual documents

Although Walter Benjamin saw that the existence of multiple reproductions of art works increased access to their image content⁸, the mechanical copying of photographs is the cause of the impossibility to keep the dispersion of items under control.

Thanks to photographic technologies, the same image can be made at various

times, for different purposes and audiences. Therefore, as grasped by photographer Allan Sekula⁹ and clearly disclosed by Canadian professor Joan Schwartz, «the meaning of a photographic document lies not in the content or the form but in the context of document creation»¹⁰.

Furthermore, the Canadian professor has recognized that the photographic meaning depends largely on functional context, which transforms photographic images in archival documents¹¹.

A picture could be stored in several types of archives, for instance: corporate, governmental, amateur, family and artists' ones or also in libraries and museums. The visual document is acquired by each of these bodies for and with different stories, and generally the item's author does not correspond with the current custodian.

In fact, in several cases, a picture had been passed down to different custodians and it is easy to discover a photo without a trace of its original context. For this reason, the original bond between records in a photographic collection is frequently broken or, perhaps, has really never existed. This is due to the fact that most photographic fonds originated from collective purposes and in order to link, usually in a subjective way, single units with other ones with similar objects or historical contexts.

This archival peculiarity of photographic collections takes archivist Luciana Duranti's definition to its most extreme: «in an archive the relationships between documents are different, and each archival record is unique in its context»¹².

On account of this given background, it is possible to realize that some pictures and their prints are spread and preserved in different ways as a consequence of the existence of a power force in the choice, selection, retention and accessibility of records.

Even though it was difficult for the archival community to admit it, the archivist is a key figure in this story-telling. Only quite recently has the archivist's powerful role been recognized thanks to, in particular, the revolutionary contribution of the Canadian archival school.

The Canadian scholars Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, as well as the international archival community¹³, have highlighted the groundlessness of the professional myth of impartiality, neutrality, and objectivity. They thought that «through archives, the past is controlled and certain stories are privileged and others marginalized»¹⁴.

Archivists are indeed silent «arbiters of power» that, with «rhetoric of neutrality», have the faculty to decide on what to preserve, and choose what will become an archive during the documental appraisal¹⁵.

Researches often use archives without realizing the heavy layers of intervention and meaning coded in the records¹⁶. They enter in an archive acknowledging it not as a power space, which it actually represents, but rather as the commonly accepted image of a “cradle” of memory and knowledge. Which is supported by an unquestionable statement: without archives our memory will be lost because what we preserve reflects our past and its knowledge.

Accordingly, as defined by Schwartz and Cook, «archives are social constructs with power of remembering over forgetting»¹⁷.

Control of an archive is linked with the attention or negligence to transmit documentation and let it circulate. These activities reflect the value appointed on information in a society, which means control of society itself¹⁸.

The condition that an archive is not “innocent” becomes clearer in a photographic fond, whose records themselves are not impartial, considering that a photographic document is not neutral because the camera lens is never objective¹⁹. In fact, behind a camera there is a photographer with his/her eye and his/her intentions.

Moreover, human intervention in visual messages given by pictures is remarkable when a proliferation of photo copies occurs in different contexts. The capability to easily copy a picture influences the activities aiming to manipulate the image and the business controlling its circulation. We are in the presence of a situation where the photographer, the printer and then the archivist, has the strength to call the shots of wandering copies; they could decide where to send, direct or store a document, and where not.

Furthermore, the photographic coping action usually allows a reworking to insert headings, change the light and dark, hide or retouch a section for many reasons.

All of these issues of power, coping, dissemination and manipulation could be studied and understood thanks to a complex case study like the photographs of Cesare Battisti’s last instants.

Case study: Cesare Battisti’s photographed death

It is well known that the pictures could be used to teach history but, considering what just explained above, is essential to study, understand and be able to hand down each precise prospective of the context in which the document was created and then preserved.

The photos of Italian politician Battisti are a good example to illustrate the

most frequently meaning of use and abuse of visual memory since the beginning of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the case testify archivist's intervention in the selection of records, or rather for this circumstance, their conservation of copies as the will to preserve the same image of a historical fact.

Biographical notes

Cesare Battisti (1875-1916) was a journalist and a geographer born in Austria, he ran some newspapers in Trento, city in that moment under Hapsburg government, and he was also deputy in the Austrian Parliament²⁰. When World War One broke out, Battisti himself decided to fight for the Italian side but was captured by Austrian army, then was taken to trial and finally, only two days later, hanged as a traitor.

The context of these events is the Italian contemporary history and it is especially related on Italian *Irredentism*. This movement had the aim to complete the Italian territorial unity thanks to the annexation of territories which are commonly considered of Italy, for language, culture and geography characteristics.

The examination of this case study is consistent because the moments that followed his arrest until the capital punishment were recorded by an accurate photographic sequence of countless snapshots that have immortalized his dead body forever in the collective visual memory.

The use and abuse of Battisti's pictures

There was originality in the use of a new technology to fix in the memory an event which was immediately wide admitted as a relevant fact which would be part of the history. This evaluation was made by Italian historians Diego Leoni and Sonia Pinato who have recently conducted a detailed research on Battisti's photos. In order to recall Battisti's last instants they have analyzed all his pictures group which was taken by different points of view. In fact, as Pinato argued, «a forty-eight-hour macabre and fascinating reportage was made, which transformed those days in one of the first media events of history»²¹.

This case could be paradoxically juxtaposing with Kodak advertisements in the 1930s where the movie camera was promoted to make people "alive forever"²². On the contrary, Cesare Battisti will be forever remembered lifeless near the smiling executioner (fig. 2). Thus it was realized an interesting overlapping between a modern instrument, the camera, and an ancient technique, the hanging.

It is commonly known that several written testimonies recorded the events of those days in private diaries or in memories published in newspapers. But the scene was turned in a show thanks to the use of the mechanical eye which caused the dehumanization of Battisti's body.

The proliferation of cameras during the circulation of Battisti in the streets could be linked with the consequently circulation of several pictures in different cities. The historian Diego Leoni well illustrated this situation: «little negatives and big plates went out, were immediately reproduced, retouched and subtitled; thousand of those photographic shreds about last instants of Battisti's body were disseminated in the world becoming modern *memorabilia* and being object for lucrative trades or political propaganda and outright cult»²³.

This background allows understanding that Battisti's death is still known nowadays as a consequence of the creation, dissemination, retention and archiving of those documents, his visual memory.

The visual series - without a definite author - spread everywhere with different purposes: the Austrian would have to show publicly the traitor's images whiles the Italian remembered an exemplar patriot.

Pictures dissemination of a traitor or patriot in different archives

The dissemination of Battisti's pictures allows the use of them in different contexts and nowadays it is possible to pinpoint in many archives, administrative or private.

Thanks to Sonia Pinato researches in occasion to the writing of the photographic book with Diego Leoni, it came out that the majority of images in circulation are copies: in photographic or, mostly, in postcard form²⁴. In fact, during her studies in several international preservation centers, she could analyze only two originals, which are still preserved in Trento Museum²⁵.

The two historians, indeed, have searched in many administrative archives and private collections and in their book proposed 84 different pictures in succession. Furthermore, they have acknowledged that it is possible to follow the traces of many others photographic testimonies.

As Pinato clearly explained, immediately after the death, countless copies were produced by the *contronegativo* technique²⁶.

Some different examples could be quoted to underline the presence of Battisti's photos in different archives and with different archival stories. Here below, there will explain some significant personally experiences in different archives in

order to understand some possible archiving methodologies.

1)

Various Italian archives, privates or government as well, preserve copies of a special postcard drawn between 1916 and 1918 for the well-known sequence of the *Prestito di Guerra* campaign.

These postcards series was drawn during the First World War by famous artists with a specific indirect purpose to spread a massive visual propaganda. Then the series was printed and diffused in great number, usually for free, to soldiers and their families with the aim to captivate their interest and ask an economical contribution for war costs.

Among this iconographic documentation, there is a specific postcard in memory of Battisti that was printed by typographer Pilade Rocco in Milan. The name of the typographer is pursuant to the note below the image (fig. 1) but we have not more information about his assignment. Accordingly with the political purpose earlier explained the printer chose among his photographic sequence precisely the picture in which Battisti was portrayed more stern, as he felt no fear.

The picture here reported is without writing on its verso because it is part of a collective fond on *Prestito di Guerra* postcards preserved in Archivio Ligure della Scrittura Popolare (ALSP) in Genoa²⁷. However, considering the aim of the *Prestito di Guerra* sequence, it could be easily to find copies of the same postcard in different private archives, maybe with text dated during the First World War.

2)

Some municipality photographic archives preserve fonds of local photographers and it is not uncommon to find some pictures related to Cesare Battisti. For example, in Lucca city there is the Archivio Fotografico Lucchese (AFL) that own two peculiar copies of the examined series about Battisti's calvary²⁸.

In fact, the archive retained two Battisti's images in postcard form that represent the politician before and after his execution (fig. 2-3). They are particular, not only because are photographed from two different point of view respect the sequence reported in Leoni's book. Particularly, they prove the presence of different photographers: on the one hand, because they are made from different angles; on the other hand, in the second image (fig. 2) two or three photographers are visible on the left side. Moreover, they are relevant for the annotations on their verso.

In fact, behind the pictures there are two pencil annotations in different hand respect owner's one. These photos, part of *Gianpiero Brancoli Pontera* fond, were

transferred in the administrative archive by photographer's sons, after their father's death. Brancoli (1922-2005) was born in 1922 and for this reason he could not take personally the photos in Trento, probably he bought them in order to make other copies and sell them in his shop located in Lucca city centre. The author of the notes marked the day of Battisti's death but also the hours and minutes: «12 luglio 1916 / ore 19.15» behind the first and «12 luglio 1916 / ore 19.18» on the second.

If we can suppose that he bought them when started his photographic activity, maybe when he was about twenty years old, it is interesting to know that Battisti's visual memory was always running and in a political context far from Trento.

This is a good example of how a lack of archival information about the identification of the author causes the impossibility to properly understand and contextualize a document. The archivist should give as much information as possible about the story of the collection and try to explain the possible author's notes for each document.

3)

Knowing the exploitation of the copies of the death picture sequence, it should not surprise to find a lot of copies in an archive which preserved documentation on a museum related to Italian wars. In fact, after the Great War, in Italy were established a lot of war museums to preserve the memory of this disastrous event and correlated occurrences like irredentism movement.

In particular, in Genoa, since 1937 was established a special governmental institution called *Museo delle guerre d'Italia* with the aim to collect documentation about the wars fought by Italian citizens since 1841. A municipal commission, between 1937 and 1945, collected several books and stored paper documentation like factsheets of injured or death soldiers and gathered a lot of personal memorabilia. This documentation was stored in order to create a didactical museum with political propaganda aim. Then, the museum was closed after a short time, due to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The museum commission received a collection of 45 pictures about Battisti, Damiano Chiesa and Fabio Filzi's deaths (fig. 4)²⁹. Also in this case, there is a lack of information about the author of collection and especially about the author of the images.

The recent restoration of original order of the documentary material collected for the War Museum and currently preserved in *Istituto Mazziniano* in Genoa has allowed to understand the motivation behind a so conspicuous presence of copies of that series³⁰. In this case, the images that Battisti's visual memory should have

been shown in the museum with educational purposes.

4)

Moreover, it is possible to individuate numerous private archives during a brief research online, for example: on Auction Houses's databases and *eBay* platform there are a lot of Battisti's photos for sold and others are available, for different purpose to remember the event, on *Europeana* project³¹.

Suggested database project

The complex examined case naturally proposes a digital database realization, ideally linked with *Europeana* project. Thanks to this tool it will be possible to obtain a shared platform where users, governmental and private archives, upload some metadata, like the author, negative/positive type, picture/postcard form and so on. In particular, I would suggest taking in consideration the most important metadata useful for this research, namely the archival history with which an item arrived in an archive.

The town of Trento or another public institution or association could obtain a leading role in a project like this in order to design a shared platform on which different users could upload their copy of Battisti's death. In this way, it will be possible to discover and analyze all of pictures retained all over the world by different custodians.

The aim of this possible database is the digital reconstruction of the entire collection with each picture that were taken by different cameras, during the events through 48 hours before Battisti's death.

Furthermore, I would underline the positive effects of an International project like this for the recognition of archivists power in the retention of common visual memory.

Conclusion

This research on archivists' power in relation to the circulation of picture copies could highlight archivist and archiving role in contemporary age.

Archivists have the task to manage even more modern documents including photographs. In their daily activities they find frequently originals and copies, positives and negatives, and they should catalogue them with precise description

standards. For example, in Italy there is the national *Scheda F* which is a detailed guideline usable to define all photographic typology and characteristics³². In this way it is possible to keep a specific file on every different detectable item.

Recalling the initial reflection on diplomatics terminology, it is important to assert how photos are not comparable to other documents and for this reason it is also wrong apply the concept of selection or discard dispositions. In fact, how it is clarified with the analysis of this paper and the case study, equally to originals, copies are relevant tools for their history and context.

A photographic archivist should pay more attention respect other documentary materials about their contexts and transfers of ownership because each picture could have different archival stories following the years. And archivist should try to find the initial context of a photo although it is often lost when it is stored. In fact, as highlighted by professor Jennifer Tucker, «although information can sometimes be reconstructed by reading verbal sources (transcripts of scientific meetings, correspondence, and reports in the photographic press, for example), as well as by comparisons with other visual materials, including drawings and prints made around the same time, it is often hard to trace the names of individual photographers of surviving images, their subjects, and, most important, their visual contexts»³³.

The archivist should recognize that his/her role in the description and in the appraisal activity cannot be neutral, however, especially for this reason, he/she should be as clear and transparent as possible in interpretations and choices that he/she make. A simple but useful methodology to use in order to face confusing situation like these, is to record of all little aspects about the transmission of documents in a conservative archive and note all the information about the context in which it was taken or preserved before.

Furthermore, this reflection is useful to take into account how to approach digital photos in which it is more difficult define original between manipulated pictures. Even though the support is changed the archival methodologies should be the same and the archivist should record all available traces and data.

Thanks to the adoption of appropriate standards the archivist should record pictures even if they are manipulated. This is due to the fact that, how showed before, also retouched pictures could transmit a specific will and prove a historical phase. The researcher will be who examines and re-elaborates all available information in order to deduce the correct evaluations.

The archivist is a mediator and for his/her role has the power to hand down to researchers more clear and detailed data. Like a camera zoom, he/she should focus on content, filter information, without neglecting the context.

In conclusion, the aim of this paper is to reflect on the circumstances in which an archivist faced daily during his/her work: the presence of copies, especially in a photographic archive, and the consequent difficulties to understand and describe their context. The final issue of the acquisition and arrangement process is related to the choice of destroying or not the items, given their quality of copy. Thanks to an archival theoretical approach and the Battisti's case study archivists' actions are underlined during the passing of time: the archivist as keeper and selector of memory has now, as then, a leading role and a power in the copying, sending and preserving copies of an item disseminating in the whole society. In this perspective, the society could be read as a widespread archive in which each record has multiple stories and multiple layers of human interpolation.

Lucca, June 29th, 2016.

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- 24 D. Leoni and S. Pinato studied the photographic fonds retained in Trento Historical Museum, Historical photographic archive in Trento Province, Italian Historical museum of war in Rovereto, Italian Risorgimento Insitute – Central Risorgimento Museum in Rome, National Historical Fototeca Ando Gilardi, Osterreichisches Staatsarchiv Kriegsarchiv, Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek Bildarchiv in Vienna, Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandum in Innsbruck.
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[lare/](#) (retrieved June 6, 2016).

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Fig. 1. Recto and back side of the postcard with Battisti's picture for the National credit for war, printed by typographer Pilade Rocco in Milan, Archivio Ligure della Scrittura Popolare, Genoa.



Fig. 2. Hanging of the patriot Cesare Battisti: a moment of the execution, Trento: 12 luglio 1916, 19.15, Postcard, gelatin, 90x140 mm., AFL, Fondo Giampiero Brancoli, GBF 276.

Fig. 3. Hanging of the patriot Cesare Battisti: a moment after the execution, Trento: 12 luglio 1916, 19.18, Postcard, gelatin, 90x140 mm, AFL, Fondo Giampiero Brancoli, GBF 277.



Fig. 4. Group of Battisti's pictures preserved in Archivio Museo delle Guerre, Genoa.