

Images of madness. The end of mental hospitals illustrated through photographs

Federica Manzoli

ICS - Innovations in the Communication of Science, SISSA, Trieste, Italy

Abstract: *The use of photography in the field of psychiatry is an eloquent example of the complex evolution of the relationship between science, communication and society. The research that follows analyses the development of such a relationship in a crucial period of the history of psychiatry: the 1970s. That was the time that witnessed the revolution of a science which admitted the failure of its methods and 'instruments', mental hospitals. That was also the time when a profound change took place in the communicative methods of photography related to this uncertain field of knowledge. A group of photographers, driven by the political situation of the time, covered the end of mental hospitals.*

Keywords: Mental health, photography, Franco Basaglia

Section: Article

Translation: Anna Drandaki, SSLMIT, Trieste, Italy

1. Context

In the archipelago of psychiatry, communication between the islands which represent the patients, their families, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, and so on, takes place through the bridges built by medicine, the law, solidarity, training and the projects undertaken at the places where treatment is given.

Nevertheless, the connection between this archipelago and the other archipelagos in our society is flimsier: communication does not take place through bridges, but rather through boats such as newspapers, television, the cinema, literature, painting and photography, to name but a few. Through these media, society receives an image of mental illness which fuels people's perception of it. Furthermore, society reflects this image and thus influences the way in which communication and psychiatric practice are conducted.

This research has dealt with the question of the encounter between two cultures: a scientific community, the community of psychiatry, at a time when its theories and practice were being revolutionised, and the community of a group of communicators through photography who were not experts in that field. That encounter took place within a context of socio-cultural change between the late 1960s and the late 1970s, when the Italian Parliament passed Law 180 (1978) which abolished mental hospitals, thanks to the movement led by Franco Basaglia.

During that decade, the two communities came into contact because they shared a common ideology and contributed towards change: a group of socially militant photographers decided to use their cameras to cover psychiatric institutions from a different point of view and make them the focus of their communicative work for the first time ever; on the other hand, a group of psychiatrists realised that communication could play an important role in the attempt to change the public's image of insanity as well as the image conferred to mental hospitals by positivist psychiatry.¹

2. Methodology

The study of the photographic records as well as the interaction between the community of the professionals in communication and the community of psychiatry was conducted with the use of two different methodological approaches. The first one was the semiotic analysis of a qualitatively significant sample of photographs which recorded the changes that took place during the historical period examined.² Ten images were taken into consideration. The images were chosen among the work of Luciano D'Alessandro, who was the first to enter a mental hospital in the second half of the 1960s using photography without classificatory aims and trying to document the situation of the inmates in the mental hospital of Nocera Inferiore;³ Carla Cerati and Gianni Berengo Gardin, who took the photographs which were published under Basaglia's supervision in *Morire di classe, la condizione manicomiale fotografata da C.C. e G.B.G.*;⁴ Gian Butturini, Paola Mattioli, Uliano Lucas, Neva Gasparo, photographers who translated the moment when mental hospitals opened their gates to images. In particular, they documented the opening of the mental hospital of Trieste, a city which was in the front line of the battles that Basaglia's movement fought.

The second methodological approach was based on a qualitative method of the social sciences, the open, detailed interview.⁵ Five of the above-mentioned photographers were interviewed in early 2003; the scripts of the interviews went through content analysis and were organised into a narrative sequence.

The simultaneous use of both methods allowed for a contextualised analysis of the photographs and provided an overall image of the communication of mental health during the period when mental hospitals were closed down.

3. The use of photography in the field of psychiatry

Psychiatry and photography were born with a few decades separating them. Their encounter produced the use of photography for classificatory and teaching purposes in order to identify, study and classify mental illness.^{6, 7} Photographers entered mental hospitals as doctors' delegates with the sole aim of using a technique which faithfully reproduced reality in order to record a form of illness. Their role often overlapped with that of the doctors' who had often used the camera in the nineteenth century to record and classify the signs of illness in order to explain them to their students (use for classificatory purposes). Nineteenth-century positivist psychiatry used photography to guarantee scientific knowledge and at the same time it fuelled the illusion that it was able to control mental illness through mental hospitals.

As a matter of fact, photography resolved the problems that arose from the sketches previously made to illustrate patients in therapy. Moreover, it was an effective teaching instrument. By looking at the signs of mental illness on the photograph it was thought that it was possible to study its real characteristics in order to recognise it in the field and manage to control it. Therefore, the subjects of the photographs had a purely classificatory value; they were objects through which the signs of insanity were identified.

Towards the end of the 19th century, photography gradually lost its classificatory and teaching interest and was instead transformed into a tool which celebrated the "order" of mental hospitals as opposed to the mental "disorder" of their inmates (use for illustrative purposes). During the same period of time, the studies of criminology flourished and reached their peak in Italy with Cesare Lombroso, the eminent criminal anthropologist.⁸ Psychiatric photography then became a tool to threaten inmates as if they were criminals in prison. Its function was comparable to that of the American "Wanted" posters (use for identificatory purposes and in order to coerce).⁹



1938, photographs from the archive of the former mental hospital Paolo Pini, by permission of Camera Chiara, Milan.

4. Subversive stories

Such use of photography in the field of psychiatry changed very little until the mid 1960s when a group of socially militant photographers decided to use the camera in order to look at psychiatric institutions from a different point of view. Those photographers entered mental hospitals with the aim of removing the social stereotype of insanity and that of recovering the inmates' value by showing the violence they are subject to once they are committed to mental hospitals.

The images of mental illness changed drastically and a great deal of those photographs were used in turn to change psychiatric knowledge: "mental hospitals finally became a source of information, a productive source. Photographers worked in mental hospitals and lived in them at the same time..."¹⁰

But it is necessary to distinguish two fundamental periods in this process of change in communicative patterns before Law 180 was passed. There was an initial period of protest when photographers such as D'Alessandro, Cerati, Berengo Gardin entered mental hospitals to document their appalling conditions, and a second period, after Franco Basaglia's experiment in Trieste became known to the political movements of the time, when professional communicators entered mental hospitals as inmates (however temporary that situation was) in order to record on film the hospitals opening up to the outside world. In the first period, *Morire di Classe* became a manifesto for Basaglia and the doctors who rejected institutional psychiatry: in that photographic book, photography acted as an interpretation of a social and scientific event but, most of all, it acted as a testimony, as communicative evidence of the horrifying conditions of mental hospitals and the need to abolish them.



Carla Cerati, photograph in Morire di classe, 1969 and Basaglia prepara la mostra di Parma (Basaglia prepares the Parma exhibition), in Trieste dei manicomi – Antologia precaria di un cambiamento epocale – Diciannove fotografi raccontano, Trieste, Cultura Viva Editrice, 1998.

Once that period of protest was over, the photographers who covered the opening of mental hospitals searched for visual channels through which they could show the definite creation of a rift between traditional medical practice, mental hospitals and mental illness. Communication, psychiatry and all the other participants in the debate on mental health created a new relationship between them.

The photographs dating from that period became real stories told by a community of communicators who narrated the changing situation through images. Those photographs used consolidated visual strategies and iconographic references,¹¹ which were integrated into the new system of values formed around the core term "psychiatry".



Gian Butturini, 1973, photograph in C'era una volta l'ospedale psichiatrico, Brescia, Area Market, 1998.



Uliano Lucas, Cernusco sul Naviglio, 1978, Nel cortile dell'ospedale psichiatrico (In the yard of the mental hospital), photograph in Altri sguardi, Roma, T-Scrivo Edizioni, 2001.

4a. Subversion of the scientific order

The stories told through those photographs show faces and places in a new way but also challenged the scientific principles of the time and their lack of efficiency before the problem of insanity and transmitted the patients' complexity to the public. When they show the people committed to mental hospitals or those who were released, the photographs also frame the human angle of their suffering; they focus on emotions, far from the common stereotypes, and transmit them to their public in a very persuasive way (this is why their performative force comes to the fore); they record the rift between scientific knowledge and the reality of mental hospitals.

Before the 1960s, photography was used instead of studying patients directly and it had come to be considered completely objective; photography was a "tool which eliminated both the relation between doctor and patient and the latter's internal life".¹² The history of psychiatry, reconstructed from the stories told through photographs, from the images of the protest and the opening that followed, records the gradual loss of the control that doctors had over patients. By closing down mental hospitals, the scientific community actually admitted its lack of control and the ineffectiveness of its methods put into practice in mental hospitals and rejected at that time.^{13, 14}

The photographs taken and the stories told by photographers who went through that communicative experience testify the way in which mental institutions reacted and the impact Basaglia's movement had on them:

Basaglia's reform not only abolished mental hospitals and their methods but also abandoned an approach whose aim was to determine the boundaries of mental illness and classify it into

categories accordingly. On the contrary, the reform aimed at treating illness through an adequate response of local health services to each specific case. The rift between science and mental hospitals which ended an unsustainable theoretical and practical problem through the destruction of psychiatric institutions was psychiatry's own admission that it was unable to fit within the categories of medicine the range of complexity that the experience of the alienated human being presents.¹⁵

4b. Subversion of the linear model of communication

The transition from photography at the time of positivist psychiatry to a new way of seeing things marks the passage from the time when photography was a cognitive instrument used to celebrate science to the time when photography became an instrument of criticism and protest. The photographs taken at the time testify the passage from the period of positivist psychiatry, which deals with insanity as an object of study, to the period when psychiatry acknowledges its failures.

In this case a specific social group (a group of socially militant photographers of the time) turned to a scientific community (that of psychiatry or, better, that of Basaglia) which, in its turn, welcomed it and asked for its co-operation, having realised the need to transmit this new message to the public who would have to integrate the inmates released with Law 180.

In comparison with the first period of positivist psychiatry when photography was used in order to diagnose mental illness or celebrate science, a new way to present the most uncertain branch of medicine emerged; that new way focused on the social aspects which the existence of mental hospitals implied and on the consequences of a science which proved inadequate because it oppressed patients instead of liberating them.

With the photographers of that new approach, the linear (visual) communicative model, a convenient and economical model which had existed since the first steps of photography and was based on the transmission of faithfully real contents, was abandoned. On the contrary, the new approach to seeing things transmitted all the uncertainties of scientific knowledge, broke the existing patterns, asked questions without finding any answers and showed a completely different situation, that is to say people that not only suffer but also react in the end.

5. Conclusion

Before people in modern society got hold of the term alienation and assigned a symbolic meaning to it, they attributed to the mentally ill their own alienated will. In reality, this field has been outlined by the space of commitment and the way in which it has been formed should show us how the experience of insanity has been constructed.¹⁶

A way to identify the mechanisms of such exclusion is to analyse the communicative interaction (or lack of it) between psychiatry and the public. The ways in which this world is represented is yet another sign of the rift between people who suffer from mental disorders and the rest of society. The study of the photographs covering insanity and mental hospitals allowed the reconstruction and interpretation of change.

However, although mental hospitals have been closed down and replaced by mental health centres, the visual communication of mental health without risking to fuel stereotypes regarding the stigma of mental illness remains an open question.

Int. – If you wanted to photograph a madman now, wouldn't it be possible anymore?

Carla Cerati – I hope not.

Notes and references

- ¹ Pitrelli, N., *L'uomo che restituì la parola ai matti*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2004.
- ² Greimas A. J. (1984). *Sémiotique figurative et sémiotique plastique*. Actes Sémiotiques. Documents, 60, Paris, 1984 (Italian trans., *Semiotica figurativa e semiotica plastica*, in Corrain, L. and Valenti, M. (eds.), *Leggere l'opera d'arte*, Bologna, Progetto Leonardo, 1991).
- ³ D'Alessandro L. (1969). *Gli esclusi, fotoreportage da una istituzione totale*. Milano: il Diaframma.
- ⁴ Cerati, C., Berengo Gardin, G. (1998). *Per non dimenticare. 1968. La realtà manicomiale di "Morire di classe"*. Ongaro Basaglia, F. (ed.), Torino: Edizioni Gruppo Abele.
- ⁵ Ricolfi, L. (1997). *La ricerca qualitativa*. Roma: La nuova Italia scientifica.
- ⁶ Kemp, M. (1997). *A Perfect and Faithful Record: Mind and Body in Medical Photography before 1900*. In *Photography in Science: Beauty of Another Order*. Ottawa: Yale University Press.
- ⁷ *Nascita della fotografia psichiatrica, exhibition catalogue*, La Biennale, Provincia di Venezia, 1981.
- ⁸ Colombo G. (2000). *La scienza infelice*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- ⁹ Gilardi A. (2003). *Wanted!*. Milano: Paravia Bruno Mondadori Editori.
- ¹⁰ Pirella A. (1981), *I poteri dell'oggettivazione*. In *Inventario di una psichiatria*. Roma: Electa.
- ¹¹ Sontag S. (1977), *On photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (Italian trans., *Sulla fotografia*, Torino: Einaudi, 1992).
- ¹² Foucault, M. (1998). *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris : Éditions Gallimard (Italian trans., *Storia della follia nell'età classica*, Milan : BUR, 1998 ; English trans., *Madness and Civilisation*).
- ¹³ Basaglia, F., Basaglia Ongaro F. (1969). *Introduzione*. In Goffman, E., *Asylums. Le istituzioni totali: i meccanismi dell'esclusione e della violenza*, Torino: Einaudi.
- ¹⁴ Colucci, M., Di Vittorio P. (2001). *Franco Basaglia*. Milano: Paravia Bruno Mondadori Editori.
- ¹⁵ De Peri F. (1984). *Il medico e il folle*. In *Malattia e medicina, Storia d'Italia*, vol. VII, Torino: Einaudi.
- ¹⁶ Foucault M., *op. cit.*