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INTRODUCTION

Iconic images in modern Italy: politics, culture and society

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'But this is not my Italy!' exclaimed a friend when presented with the iconic images that populate this special issue, uncovering the fundamental problem at the heart of the concept of the 'iconic image' within Italian culture. In this issue the images analysed include photographs of Gramsci, Mussolini, Aldo Moro, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino. She said: 'What about Anna Magnani in *Roma Città Aperta*? Or the photograph of Pope Pius XII holding his hands out to the bewildered Romans after the bombing in San Lorenzo in 1944? What about Olivieri Toscani and the Benetton ad where the priest kisses the nun in the 1980s?' An 'iconic image', it turns out, represents an idea that is seemingly obvious to everyone, and yet, once it is unpacked, the parameters that define it begin to dissolve. Given the multitude of meanings and functions that the concept of an 'iconic image' implies, it is not surprising that they tend to have had varying interpretations as didactic instruments, as propaganda, as artworks and as media for transmitting visual, aesthetic and metaphysical content.

Increasing scholarly attention is being paid to the role of photography in Italian culture (see David Forgacs' *Italy's Margins* (2014), Sally Hill and Giuliana Minghelli's *Stillness in Motion: Italy, Photography and the Meanings of Modernity* (2014), Giorgia Alù and Nancy Pedri's *Enlightening Encounters: Photography in Italian Literature* (2015) and Martina Caruso's *Italian Humanist Photography from Fascism to the Cold War* (2016)), indicating an important trend in the study of images and their circulation in Italian cultural studies. This issue on *Iconic Images in Modern Italy* seeks to explore the recent developments in the conversation on iconic images in the fields of art history, film studies and history of photography within Italian cultural studies, concerning the ways we perceive and interpret such images. Eight authors, some of whom presented their research at the ASMI annual conference in November 2013 at Senate House, University of London, reveal the ways in which selected iconic images have contributed to generating or defining perceptions of 'Italianicity'.

Many of these images still resonate in contemporary culture, such as the photograph of Aldo Moro by the Brigate Rosse. Others, like those of Gabriele d'Annunzio, may once have been iconic and have since lost their appeal. While the issue does not propose to be exhaustive of such a vast and controversial theme, it documents the rise and fall of selected iconic images, from the Liberal era to *Tangentopoli*, with a focus on the political in modern and contemporary Italian visual culture.

The idea of the iconic image as symbolic political currency is explored with reference to US public life in Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites' *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy* (2007). In this insightful publication, the

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authors examine iconic images from ‘US domestic media’, exploring how an iconic image is at once a ‘highly specific object of memory and admiration’ and yet also an ‘abstract representation whose value [is] far more symbolic than referential’ (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 6). Their focus is thematic, moving through nine selected images, including Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* (1936), Alfred Eisenstaedt’s *Times Square Kiss* (1945), Joe Rosenthal’s *Raising the Flag on Mount Suribachi* (1945) and Thomas Franklin’s *Three Firefighters Raising the American Flag* (2001). By connecting them thematically, the authors discuss the transition from a democratic to a liberal polity (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 19). Henry Luce, Director of *Life* magazine, stated that the twentieth century would be the ‘American century’, so the iconic images that mark American life have become iconic images globally.

Italian iconic images, on the other hand, have had a much more restricted, national circulation. Arguably, the Italian images that have the most resonance internationally are ‘foreign’: Robert Capa’s photograph of an American GI and a Sicilian peasant during the liberation of Italy in 1943 or Ruth Orkin’s *American Girl* (1951) of a beautiful American woman in Florence walking through a crowd of Italian men who gaze at her. Ultimately, the most iconic image of modern Italy may be the film still from Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* (1960) of Anita Ekberg (Swedish), wading in a velvet ball gown into the Trevi Fountain. This last image is part of the Hollywood dreamworld construction, the relative pervasiveness of which Stephen Gundle explores in his article ‘Hollywood Glamour and Mass Consumption in Postwar Italy’, arguing that the notion of glamour attached to certain ideas of Italianicity was more of an international, than a national, idealisation (Gundle 2002, 95–118). In fact, the iconic images that have had greater national circulation are ones that might be overlooked internationally, ones that tend to be laden with a darker, heavier meaning or ones that belong to the film world, in particular neorealist film from the 1940s and 1950s, and in that case can be considered to be part of a ‘collective imaginary’, rather than a ‘collective memory’.

Whereas Hariman and Lucaites consider their iconic images as ‘performative models for citizenship’ and as witness to how ‘photojournalism underwrites democratic polity’, a large number of the iconic images in this issue tend to be of an iconic figure rather than an event (e.g. Mussolini or Gramsci), captured in a particular pose, to be idolised or reviled, depending on political ideologies (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 12). Conversely, several authors have explored little-considered themes within the iconic, by contrasting the non-iconic with the iconic, as in Giuliana Minghelli’s ‘Icons of Remorse: Photography, Anthropology and the Erasure of History in 1950s Italy’. Here the author compares Tazio Secchiaroli’s well-known series of Aiché Nana stripping for a crowd of male onlookers with Franco Pinna’s relatively niche series of Maria di Nardò performing a *tarantata* for the Marxist anthropologist Ernesto De Martino and his team in the south of Italy. Minghelli argues that the photography of two seemingly irreconcilable realities of the 1950s (‘*paparazzismo*’ versus Ernesto De Martino’s anthropological explorations of the South) need to be studied together in order to understand a cultural negotiation of Italian identity through myth, torn between modernity and the ‘persistence of the past’.

Similarly, while regarding a very different theme (i.e. landscape), Alexandra Tommasini contrasts Gabriele Basilico’s ‘anti-iconic’ photographs of Italian landscape with what can be considered an iconic picturesque vision of Italian landscape. In ‘The Anti-Icon Icon: Gabriele Basilico’s Photographs of the Urban Italian Landscape’, Tommasini looks at Basilico’s photographs from the 1980s, positing the Italian landscape itself as a classical, iconic concept and examining the visual strategies the artist used to subvert its position within a traditional representation of landscape.

Both Tommasini and Minghelli understand the iconic in relation to a process of modernisation of the nation and a need to compare non-iconic with 'mainstream' iconic images in order to uncover more subtle aspects of Italianicity. The idea of a 'non-mainstream iconic image' is a paradox, and yet in this issue authors have also attempted to analyse alternative ideas of what the iconic might be in Italy, generally maintaining a common focus on issues of propaganda as well as image manipulation and appropriation. In this respect, Luciano Cheles' article 'Iconic Images in Propaganda' gives a general overview of the function and circulation of the iconic image in Italian culture, in particular with regard to the use of historical Italian paintings (i.e. Michaelangelo's *Pietà* or Pelizza da Volpedo's *Quarto Stato*) in twentieth-century Italian (and foreign) politics. Well-known prestigious works, argues Cheles, can help legitimise contemporary political messages to show continuity with a past that has not been repudiated.

Propaganda is also at the heart of David Forgacs' article 'Gramsci Undisabled', where he demonstrates the ways in which the image of Antonio Gramsci was 'improved' in order to highlight the politician and philosopher's power and that of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) he was meant to represent. For the purpose of branding themselves in a favourable light, the PCI sought to disguise Gramsci's physical disability in order to forge a reliable image of power. By outlining the biography of a very well-known photograph of Gramsci, a full-face portrait taken in 1922, Forgacs explores the ways in which this image has generated an ideological battle occupying a place in the collective imaginary. By not referring to his disability, Gramsci's iconic portrait fails to represent his entirety.

Giuliana Pieri, using contemporary media vocabulary to describe Gabriele d'Annunzio's self-promotional strategies, shows how modern and ruthless the glamorous warrior-poet's attitude towards self-branding his image was. By focusing on selected moments of the poet's life, Pieri observes in 'Gabriele d'Annunzio and the Self-Fashioning of a National Icon' how skilfully he manipulated his own public persona using textual and visual strategies to provoke interest, and eventually become a national icon. While his iconicity has fallen out of fashion, his methods to promote himself as such, through manipulating information to give himself celebrity status, are very eloquent to the twenty-first century 'selfie era'. Pieri observes that in the absence of illustrations and photographs in the press, as a society chronicler, d'Annunzio adopted an 'ekphrastic' strategy (that is, the exaggerated use of verbal and visual narrative) by acting not only as a journalist and a writer but also as a fashion columnist and arbiter of taste. In conflating art and life, d'Annunzio's wardrobe was central to the construction of his own myth and public persona.

Clothing (or lack of it) and self-branding are also themes at stake in Alessandra Antola Swan's article 'The Iconic Body: Mussolini Unclothed'. Photography during the Ventennio was used as part of a synergic effort in the construction of the cult of the leader, as part of a 'communication industry' *ante litteram*, transforming the figure of Mussolini into an icon. Mussolini's unclothed corporeality, observes Antola Swan, works as a powerful political instrument. As with today's celebrities, Mussolini appealed to the public's private sphere through a quasi-voyeuristic representation of the masculine. Antola Swan deconstructs the leader's superhuman projection as a result of his self-branding. His choice to portray himself in iconic states of undress (such as the famous series of photographs and films showing Mussolini harvesting bare-chested) demonstrates the dictator's innovative capacity to harness a modern attitude towards self-portrayal, similar to those adopted by contemporary Western heads of state.

Both Sally Hill and Eleanor Chiari's articles regard photographs of murdered iconic figures of the twentieth century and the manipulation of these images post-mortem by the Italian media. In 'Double Exposures: The Photographic Afterlives of Pasolini and Moro', Hill examines the role played by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Aldo Moro as recorded in photographs taken before and after their murders. Obsessively reproduced, the multiple images of those 'two abused and abject bodies' (Dino Pedriali's series of nude photographs of Pasolini a month before his death vs those in the press of his battered body, as well as Rolando Fava's iconic photograph of the leader of the Christian Democrats' body) coalesce and reflect Italy's collective, and yet divided, memory of the events (Foot 2009).

Through detailed analysis of Tony Gentile's photograph of mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino from 1993, Chiari argues that the photographic biography and the re-rendering of the seemingly ordinary photograph allow for reflection on the symbolic meaning implicit in the photograph and its transformation into 'the iconic image'. Chiari develops the paradox that an iconic photograph like this may also lose its symbolic, evocative power through overuse and satire, running against the grain of what an iconic image does, which is to gain power from vast and infinite circulation. In the case of Gentile's photograph, however, perhaps the memory of the murdered judges will be more short-lived than iconic, 'returned to the disembodied space of death and oblivion intended by the mafia and by a public unable to carry on their legacy.'

One of the aspects that links a number of these iconic photographs is a quasi-erotic fascination with the materiality of the (generally male) body, whether in death or alive. An iconic image allows the perishable body to survive in collective memory and shape it in its imaginary. These images have provoked in the past, or still do provoke, outrage, admiration, inspiration. They act as forms of visual power and authority – an authority to respect or to contest, and above all, one to examine. Where Forgacs, Cheles, Pieri and Antola Swan analyse the power of the image as brand, Chiari and Hill examine the power of the violent image as fetish, and Minghelli and Tommasini the iconoclastic power of the non-iconic image in its capacity to signify modernisation, through a dialogic conversation with the iconic. Thanks to the interesting work of our authors – Luciano Cheles, Eleanor Chiari, David Forgacs, Sally Hill, Giuliana Minghelli, Giuliana Pieri, Alessandra Antola Swan and Alexandra Tommasini – and to the precious guidance of the journal's editors, Mark Seymour and Penny Morris, this special issue on *Iconic Images* will, we trust, become a reference for the increasingly significant discipline of visual studies within Italian cultural studies.

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