FOTOCINEMA, nº 30 (2025) | | E—ISSN: 2172—0150

Letizia Battaglia, Brave, Patient and Silenced for Decades: Heroine of the Magic Lens

Letizia Battaglia valiente, paciente y silenciada durante décadas: heroína de la lente mágica

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Abstract:
Flaiano (Pescara, 1910-Rome, 1972), the screenwriter and film critic - *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960) - wrote: 'in thirty years' time, Italy will not be how the governments will have made it, but how television will have. In this country that I love, there is simply no such thing as truth. Other countries have one truth. We have infinite versions".
Flaiano's reflection makes sense in the light of the circumstances that have determined the way Italians have perceived and constructed reality in recent decades. Battaglia was a woman, a press photographer and a lucid observer of a society rotten to the core due to the organized crime that existed in the city where she was born, the place where she gave visual testimony of the consequences of confronting the Mafia. She sensed almost from the beginning of her career the perverse effect that the Mafia would have on all the aspects that ruled the lives of millions of women and men in a world of closed, patriarchal, conservative structures, anchored in traditions and codes that were imperceptible, if not completely unknown to outsiders. It did not take her long to understand that the fight against the Mafia depended not only on denouncing its actions, but, above all, on a thorough understanding of how it had permeated and moulded the mentality of institutions, families and individuals, and of how Italians had come to accept a distortion of reality, one that did not originally define them. She knew exactly what had to be exposed in order to begin to unmask and banish from people's minds the ineffability of a phenomenon whose success always depended as much on fear as on the appropriation of consciences.

Resumen:
Flaiano (Pescara, 1910—Roma, 1972) guionista y crítico cinematográfico —*La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960)— escribió: "dentro de treinta años, Italia no será cómo la habrán hecho los gobiernos sino cómo la habrá hecho la televisión. En este país que amo no existe simplemente la verdad. Otros países tienen una verdad. Nosotros tenemos infinitas versiones".
La reflexión de Flaiano cobra sentido por la manera en que los italianos han percibido y construido la realidad en las últimas décadas. Battaglia, mujer, fotógrafa de prensa, lúcida observadora de una sociedad podrida hasta las entrañas por el crimen organizado en la ciudad que la vio nacer, y en la que dio testimonio visual de las consecuencias de enfrenarse a la mafia, intuyó casi desde los inicios de su trabajo los efectos perversos de aquella en todos los aspectos que regían las vidas de millones de mujeres y hombres en un mundo de estructuras cerradas, patriarcales, conservadoras, ancladas en tradiciones y códigos imperceptibles, cuando no desconocidos para los foráneos. No tardó en comprender que la lucha contra la mafia dependía de la denuncia de sus actos y de una cabal comprensión de cómo había permeado y moldeado la mentalidad de instituciones, familias, individuos y de cómo los italianos habían llegado a asumir una distorsión de una realidad que no les definía en sus orígenes. Ella supo qué había que mostrar para empezar a desenmascarar, desterrar de las conciencias la inefabilidad de un fenómeno cuyo éxito dependió del temor y de la apropiación de las conciencias.

Keywords: Expose; Photography; Mafia; Testimony; Report; Women.

Palabras clave: Desenmascarar; fotografía; mafia; testimonio; denuncia; mujeres.

Received 2024/09/25 | | Accepted 2024/10/21

1. Introduction: Epistemic Search Based on the Shadows and Debates Regarding Image Theory in Battaglia's Photography. Understanding in Order to Unmask

The phenomenon of the Mafia has always been a kind of obsession for Italians. Inseparable from political structures, which are perceived as being distant from ordinary citizens, ineffective in responding to their demands and vital needs, since its beginnings the Mafia has exerted a power of fascination that neither the media nor photography have been able to resist. This explains why, traditionally, the subject of the Mafia has occupied a prominent place in media and photographic coverage. One might ask, however, to what extent this image, this representation of a reality that has permeated Italian society at all levels, is or has ever been that realistic. In this respect, with its images photographic language has created a series of constructions in themselves, codes that condition perception and message. Battaglia's photography as a visual discourse becomes an analysis that brings us closer to photography understood as an “artifact”, one that brings the viewer closer to the Italian reality of this violent conflict.

The selection of Battaglia's photographs proposed in this article aims to address the issues that articulate her work, starting with the main thrust of her visual narrative, which is founded on three necessarily interconnected sequential axes, effectively forming a discourse that ultimately leads to a “self-imposed” obligation to break the spiral of silence. Photography as testimony gives way to a photography of denunciation, which evolves, in a third stage, towards an understanding of the undeniable acquiescence with a cause that ideologically does not admit compromise solutions. She seeks to understand the true dimensions and implications of criminal activities that have bound the free will of citizens annulled by violence and the mistaken acceptance of a distorted reality. She seeks to understand in order to unmask.

It is, therefore, necessary to analyse the evolution of Battaglia's perspective on this Italian phenomenon in order to decipher and properly read her photographic images. Battaglia removes the mask through the photographs she takes in the city, where women only appear in the Mafia’s *backrooms,* representing a pain

that is relegated to the shadows. This Italian photographer, in her role as both a photographer and a woman, was effectively behind the camera, raising her voice for all these women. Observing Battaglia's feminist perspective in her photographic images is interesting in terms of discovering, on the one hand, what she has bequeathed to us, and, on the other, in terms of tracing the work of women photographers who developed their feminist potential in their works. "The silence of women screams out, reaches inside, leaving a mark on oblivion, which is transformed into memory written on the body, the skin (Gentile, 2009, p. 1).

2. State of the Matter

2.1. A Turning-Point: Unmasking through Image

Photography proposes points of discussion regarding knowledge based on the realms of semiotics, art and technology. Photography transforms representation by enriching the viewer's way of thinking at an everyday and popular level of communicational knowledge: "... the object is what is observed by the observer and by the viewer, while the subject goes beyond, the subject acts ... the fact that both coincide in the function of observing implies something more than the action of simply looking ...". (Parejo, 2008, p. 140). Furthermore, the Aristotelian conception of *phantasia* can help us to understand that imagination is essential for thought, although what the philosopher is really saying is that thought is always oriented towards truth and imagination – which are much less deterministic - and has a tendency to deform perception.

In *The Symbolic Imagination*, Gilbert Durant, as Bouziri (2024) points out, argues that consciousness is represented in the world in two possible ways: there is a direct form of thought "in which the thing itself seems to present itself to the spirit", as in the case of sensible perception or the concept, and an indirect form that occurs "when, for one reason or another, the thing cannot present itself in `flesh and blood'". (Durant, 1968, p.9)

In each of Battaglia's images we can read the empathy that people inspired in her; she knew how to reflect and photograph their emotions, showing the feelings of

the subjects who were somehow involved or surrounded by the Mafia. In order to achieve this, and in order to understand the authenticity of the photographed image, a brief bibliographical review helps us to recall that, if the key primitivism of Stieglitz, Marey, Edison, Muybridge and Albert Londe made them understand the synthesis of redundant movement from a cognitive point of view, the avant-garde Vertov did not move entirely away from this model which granted precedence to the cognitive over the analogical: the eye of the camera represents the possibility of making the invisible visible, of bringing light into darkness. ... of turning the lie into truth (Vertov, 1972, p. 62). Battaglia works in black and white because colour, as she herself says... "does not convince me because it seems to me that it does not yield the depth of my thought..." (Battaglia, Zanzotto, 2005). We find ourselves in an act of unmasking the image, of breaking it down into the elements that constitute it, in which respect we are making an effort to deconstruct and describe. But it is also necessary to establish relationships between all the elements in order to build a meaning; in other words, we must reconstruct in order to reinterpret.

Her sense of photographic duty was a declaration of intent, a physiological necessity, her dogma of faith: "I have experienced photography as a document, as an interpretation and much more. I experienced it as water in which I immersed, washed and purified myself. I lived it as salvation and as truth" (Amato, 2019). What came afterwards -exhibitions, books, talks, among other events and activities - seemed different to her, but not important because it was "a commitment to denounce, to remember, so that what we have suffered is not forgotten" (Day, 2023).

2.2. Courage and Resilience. The Committed Photojournalist Made Invisible

"A canopy of dead, heavy, airless stillness that hangs over us like a collapsed tent." This is how Peter Robb describes the Italian city of Palermo in his work *Midnight in Sicily* (Martinez, 2011). An entirely valid assessment, since the shadows of the Mafia permeated every corner, suffocating life and bathing the city's most recent history in blood: between 1978 and 1983 alone it claimed more than a thousand victims (Day, 2023). In the midst of such a landscape of desolation, where

everything is susceptible to corruption, displays of heroism and courage tend to be few and far between and are usually fatal.

Incredibly, this scene of devastation gave rise to courageous souls who were able to master their fear, as was the case with Letizia Battaglia: a photojournalist who, with her camera, not only documented the brutal reality of Palermo, but also broke the code of silence ("omertà") by exposing the truth, regardless of the consequences.

Letizia Battaglia (1935-2022), who was born in Palermo and died in Cefalù, Italy, was a feminist, environmentalist, human rights defender and politician. A pioneer of humanist and war photojournalism, she fearlessly documented the shocking realities caused by the Sicilian Mafia, which plunged the island into a state of terror. Undoubtedly, her iconic snapshots form a historical archive of collective memory, spanning from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, a period known as "the years of lead," the Second Mafia War, the Great Mafia War or the *Mattanza* (Dickie, 2016, pp. 307-364, p. 50).

Despite continuing to document this brutality, Battaglia did not limit herself to these horrors. With the same sensitivity and commitment, she turned her lens towards small, but significant, everyday stories, always from a feminist, passionate and countercurrent approach, seeking to portray a multifaceted narrative of resilience and dignity for a people who refused to allow themselves to be defeated by the sinister shadow, watchful eye and heavy hand of the Sicilian Mafia. A true antithesis between atrocity and exquisite subtlety.

3. Methodology: Choice of the Photographic Corpus to Be Analysed. Context, Justification and Relevance

Women and the role they have been assigned in society from the end of the 19th century to the present day have become a key focus of attention within the artistic and cultural fields. At a quantitative level a certain inequality exists in the field of photography, and proposals for visibilisation are needed in order to readdress the balance on the international art scene. We situate Battaglia's photography within a very specific spatio-temporal framework: Italy -Palermo- in the "years of lead",

which span from the early sixties to the late eighties. These were the years of an era characterized by great political and socio-cultural instability, years that not only affected the Italy of a Mafia that was ravaging the country, but also had repercussions as a criminal and cultural phenomenon in the eyes of the rest of the world. Within the context of this atmosphere of turmoil, it is obvious that her work requires a broader interpretation. That is why we propose the following objective: to demonstrate how, through her photographs, she transcends the realm of reportage. Hers was an intellectual process that responded to the need to understand in order to unmask a phenomenon, that of the Mafia, which, as stated in our work, had to resist the temptation of immediate impact. The crudeness of her images did not hide the human need to transcend the conventional frameworks of photojournalism, a genre that often lacks any kind of calm analysis. The secondary - although primordial and unavoidable - goal of this article is to show how her work evolved from beginnings constrained by the demands of a genre that has not always been able to escape the requirements of the urgent, towards a more rigorous, ground-breaking and compassionate perspective.

The Mafia's main objective was to take control in order to be able to exercise power in the political system from within. Its criminal activities included the assignation of public tenders, self-run businesses, extortion, corruption, drug trafficking, money laundering and assassinations. Some of the media in the fight against the organization kept silent out of fear, whilst others, like Battaglia, took part in the anti-mafia struggle. Although this is the general context of this article, the sample of photographic works by Battaglia that we have selected to make up our corpus of analysis corresponds to certain criteria that can be summarized by three main parameters, consisting of five thematic blocks of photographs. The three sequential periods in the photographer's journey are reflected in the testimony that prevails in her snapshots, evolving towards denunciation and, finally, the unmasking of violence. The five blocks are as follows: the first block:

Mafia[1]; the second block: Women and Children[2]; the third: Iconic[3]; the fourth: Souls Lost in the Abyss[4]; and the fifth block: Unravelling[5]. All of these photographs date from her output between 1970 and 1989. In these blocks we undertake an anthropological exploration of Battaglia's photography, as well as showing her sensitivity and progressive involvement with different aspects of the plight experienced by those who suffered from the Mafia, without overlooking the emergence of the photographer's human perspective of the world, a stance imbued with sensitivity that invites us to show her courageous deeds and her feminist media approach within the realm of contemporary art. Moreover, we cannot overlook the fact that these works are extremely varied, having been inspired by diverse readings, artistic languages, textualities and media such as cinema, all of which have transferred the phenomenon that Battaglia portrays to the screen. Our interest in the photographer Letizia Battaglia is determined by the personal commitment that the two authors of this article have undertaken in their academic endeavours to promote and visualize women, the arts and culture based on diverse approaches and methodologies within the audiovisual ecosystem, encompassing different metavisual analytical readings with epistemological value.

4. Blood Covenants: Indelible Traces of the Sicilian “omertà”

Letizia Battaglia was one of the few people who systematically documented the situation, achieving a balance by depicting both bloody crimes and Sicilian

[1] Photographs by Battaglia: Murder of magistrate Cesare Terranova (Palermo, 1979); Leoluca Bagarella, arrest (Palermo, 1979); Mother with the portrait of her missing son (Palermo, n.d.); Murder near the garage (Palermo, 1976); Rosaria Costa widow of escort Vito Schifani (Palermo, 1993) and Murder of Nerina and two friends (Palermo, 1982).
[2] Photographs by Battaglia: Women enjoying Easter Monday (Piano, 1980); Easter Sunday, celebrations (Palermo, 1984); Woman and children (Palermo, 1980); Bride stumbles over the veil (Palermo, 1980); New Year's Eve dance (Villa Airoldi, 1984); The Mysteries, the dove (Trapani, 1989); Children behind the bus (Palermo, 1970) and Embroiderer (Montemaggiore Belsito, 1987).
[3] Photographs by Battaglia: Ball girl, Cala neighborhood (Palermo, 1980); The assassin's game, Santa Clara Church (Palermo, 1982) and Greta's beauty (Palermo, 2016).
[4] Photographs by Battaglia: Letizia Battaglia embraces Marcela. Psychiatric Hospital (Palermo, 1982); Carnivals. Psychiatric hospital (Palermo, 1986) and Graziella. Psychiatric Hospital (Palermo, 1983).
[5] Photographs by Battaglia: Letizia Battaglia and other colleagues, L'Ora newspaper (Palermo, ca. 1974); Letizia Battaglia Battaglia receives the William Eugene Smith International Prize for Humanistic Photography. Beside her Lanfranco Colombo (NY, USA, 1985) and Letizia Battaglia with Giovanna Giaconia. Women's demonstration against the Mafia (Palermo, 1989).

beauty. As John Dickie, Professor of Italian Studies at University College London and author of several books on the Mafia, notes, "She had the kind of humanity not just to photograph politicians and corpses, but to record the impact of all that daily familiarity with death." Although she began her career as a photojournalist in her forties, she had to act quickly given that this coincided with the exponential rise of the mafia violence of the Corleonesi (Nadeau, 2016), whose *modus operandi* included kidnappings, extortion, violence, the disappearance of opponents and silenced assassinations. The orders of Salvatore Riina, the first *capo dei capi*, to his henchmen decreed "the extermination of all his rivals and enemies within the 'Cosa Nostra' up to the twentieth degree of kinship and from the age of six" (*Historiando ficción*, 2020). All in all, it is hard to imagine that two mafiosi would have shown any hint of remorse when, in 1987, they executed little Claudio, just ten years old, in the Palermo slum of San Filippo Neri, popularly known as ZEN. (Sanmoran, 2017).

"When they called you, they sent you somewhere, you never knew what you were going to find. [...] They had [newspaper *L'Ora di Palermo*] tuned to the police radio and there they spoke in code, but they would say the address and you went over there to see what had happened, blindly" (Day, 2023). Battaglia was the first to arrive on the scene where Claudio was lying, a common occurrence for her: "Yes, sometimes we arrived before the police," she said in an interview. She lived in a rented apartment in the centre of Palermo, which allowed the "war" correspondent to be close to the action; this, and the convenience of her Vespa motorbike, which allowed her to travel around her city day and night in a frenzy that was as tragic as it was frequent, to the point of being described as a 'moving morgue', given that there were times when she covered up to four or five murders in the same day (Ranzani, 2022). No one had yet reached Claudio, not even his relatives, when Battaglia had already photographed (in black and white) his unfortunate end. The use of black and white, to which she remained faithful for decades, was one of her two photographic hallmarks. This choice enhanced her talent and sensitivity in each and every one of the blood-filled compositions that the Mafia's oppression placed at the disposal of her lens: "I would never have accepted the red of blood. I didn't want to make a sensationalist photo" she declared (Miglierini, 2016). A black-and-white photo does not distract the

viewer's attention from the central message, whilst constituting a means of focusing on the dignity of the victims, instead of exploiting their suffering, granting the honour of recollection to all. To all, except Claudio, since those negatives never saw the red light of the photographic laboratory, because she never found the courage to develop them. Although she had already witnessed hundreds of gruesome scenes among the 600,000 shots that make up her archive, "nevertheless, the death of that innocent child, killed because he had witnessed a murder, marked me forever. They took away his right to life. The right to dream" (Day, 2023).

Taking on the mob was not her only challenge. As a woman, in a male-dominated profession, she suffered a double marginalization: her job and her gender. "My father did not understand what a female human being was. I found myself in a society where women were not taken into account" (Baldó, 2023). Women were considered insignificant. At the age of fifteen she married an older and financially stable man who did not understand her, simply to escape from her parents' home, because she wanted and needed her freedom (Domínguez, 2024).

Her ideology of freedom was so strong that she did not hesitate to risk her own safety in order to capture the faces of gangsters and criminals in her images. Death threats did not intimidate her either. Her courage and desire for justice kept her resolute when she refused to leave Palermo, refusing to live under protection, as her friend the judge and prosecutor Falcone recommended when she showed him a threatening letter she had received. Nothing and no one would ever take away her freedom again. Unfortunately, Judge Falcone himself did not suffer the same fate; his life was cut short by the Corleone Mafia, along with that of his wife, Francesca Morvillo, and three policemen from his security detail, on May 23, 1992 in the Capaci bombing[6] (Rosaria Costa, widow of escort Vito Schifani, Palermo, 1993).

In this respect, Battaglia is an example of how perseverance, talent and commitment can break down barriers, even social ones, those that "told you that if you broke up with your husband you could only be a whore". Even so, she had

[6] https://www.archivioletiziabattaglia.it/album/mafia-antimafia-cronca-nera/

the courage to do precisely this and go to Milan with her three daughters (and without requesting alimony) with one of her lovers who, despite their love for each other, "[Santi Caleca] did not want me to take pictures, he did not like it", despite being a photographer himself (Domínguez, 2024). This was a prelude to the professional marginalization she would face throughout her life. Suffice it to point out that she was the only female photojournalist hired by *L'Ora di Palermo*: "Yes, it was rare to see a female photographer. In Italy at that time there were no women photographing for newspapers. For weeklies and monthly magazines yes, but not for newspapers, for assault journalism" (Domínguez, 2024). As she specified to Miglierini (2016) "I think I have been a brave woman, in the sense that I was able to impose this thing, that I had to take pictures. In the end, over the years I achieved that respect, because at the beginning I was swept aside like a leaf".

Battaglia's career challenged the strict gender norms that prevailed in her profession, whilst her work reflected the fact that Mafia violence was also patriarchal violence. In her photos, she captured the ordeal of women, who were often relegated to being powerless witnesses in a cycle of violence dominated by men, whether they be perpetrators or victims. A significant exception was the murder of the young prostitute, Nerina, and two friends, in 1982, for breaking the code of honour by dealing drugs on the fringes of the Mafia cartel (Andreasson, 2014). In an interview with the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Battaglia recalls how "They did not want me, a photographer and a woman, to be at the scene of the crime" (Velarde, 2015). Battaglia confessed in a debate that the capo, Leoluca Bagarella, put a price on her head for immortalizing Nerea's murder (Sanviti, 2013), underlining the misogynistic hostility of the Mafia patriarchy towards a female photographer: "for the mafiosi it was humiliating for a woman to photograph them with handcuffs on" (Dominguez, 2024). According to Zecchin, Battaglia sought to provoke a reaction in her models: "I am here, I am in front of you, I have a camera" (Day, 2023). In this context, it is worth remembering that, in 1980, this same capo, during one of his arrests, clearly showed his animosity when being photographed by her[7] (Leoluca Bagarella, arrest, Palermo 1979): "he

[7] https://www.facebook.com/letiziabattagliaofficial/posts/palermo-1979 larresto-del-boss-

was very angry and when he passed in front of me he kicked me. In fact, I fell backwards right after taking this picture" (Miglierini, 2016). She admits that she was too close to him, but this was the only way to get a good shot if you carry a wide-angle lens at all times, which, together with the use of black and white, was her second inherent technical premise when capturing everything that her camera focused on.

Undoubtedly, the use of a wide-angle lens set her apart from her colleagues. Photographing the victims from the striking proximity demanded by this type of lens was her way of connecting with the dead, managing to convey the heartbreaking reality and effectively elevating a two-dimensional image to reflect the profound impact of the fratricidal conflict. For this reason, she never considered using a telephoto lens (Fasulo, 2019), this being more than just a technical decision. Rather it was an intimate declaration of her visual narrative perspective. She opted for a lens that would not zoom out, but rather bring her closer to her subjects, emphasizing the interaction and interpersonal connection between her and the subject. The result? Images that are documentary testimonies, but also deeply personal.

4.1. Photojournalist of Life

What at first seemed like an intrusion into the tragedy of others, soon turned into a bridging of two realities; not only did she immortalize the individual and collective consequences of the Mafia's inhumanity, but she also showed that, in Palermo, life also continued, even in the form of celebration when possible. This reinforces the idea that Battaglia became a powerful instrument of justice and social metamorphosis. She did not just document death, but also portrayed the precarious circumstances in which the living barely survived in run-down neighbourhoods, shorn of the usual goodness of life: "People started calling me: 'Come take some pictures of the roof of my house. I need it fixed', they would say to me" (Velarde Arriola, 2015).

With her camera and a continuously-lit cigarette dangling from her lips (one of the almost fifty she smoked a day) she would wander around, scanning the four

leoluca-bagarella-killer-di-fiducia-dei-corleones/740387594114370/

cardinal points, looking for the scene that would capture the intimate emotions of the protagonists she wanted to focus on with her camera lens. She did not limit herself to documenting events or situations. Her interest lay in the human stories behind the members of her community. Through her art, she paid homage to the resilience, the courage, the unwavering dignity of her people, revealing the humanity that terror obscured, while challenging the simplistic narratives that tended to conceal the real suffering. Her photographic mantra was to show and demonstrate: to show everyday life and to demonstrate that, despite adversity, life does not stand still despite challenging contexts. Moreover, not only did it continue, but, when possible, it was even celebrated, thus vindicating festivities, pilgrimages, religious celebrations and other customs as authentic acts of cultural resistance.

Her visual work became poetry, sublimating in art her innate mastery when it came to finding the perfect angle and capturing the intimate, true and ambivalent beauty of those who were fighting for their dignity in times overshadowed by tragedy. As such, in an interview with the American publication, *The Daily Beast*, she pointed out that what she longed for with the duality of her work was “to denounce corruption and exalt beauty” (Fondazione MAXXI, n. d.).

As a multifaceted activist with deep feminist undertones, her work as a committed photographer added a crucial dimension to her struggle for social justice and gender equality, founded on the pillars of denunciation and empathy. We should not overlook the fact that without feminism it is impossible to understand the life and work of Palermo's most illustrious photographer. She did not only seek to dignify those around her, but also sought to give them all a voice, with special emphasis on those souls who were lost in the abyss, especially women and children.

4.2. Women Resist, Children Illuminate

In the society of Palermo, women were relegated to subjugated roles from childhood, moulded by patriarchal structures that condemned them to an existence of inequality and submission. However, for Battaglia, they were the real load-bearing walls of society, the strong ones, the ones who knitted the collective fabric together. They were indispensable pillars in the face of inescapable

misfortune, confirming the fact that life always finds a way to prevail, sustained as they were by tireless references of hope and renewal through birth, upbringing and family cohesion.

As a photographer Battaglia admired the sublime perfection of the female body, extolling each of its forms with an inordinate aesthetic fascination. Although she valued all her surroundings, her predilection for portraying women was unavoidable for her: "I like the hair, the round shapes of women" (Meer, 2016). As she stated to the English newspaper *The Guardian*: "I find women beautiful and courageous, and I love photographing them. They have a lot of dreams inside them." (Andreasson, 2014). She found it impossible not to project herself onto them: "In all the girls I have photographed I am there: it's as if the girl I used to be stepped out of the lens as I photographed, and found herself and her lost fantasy world" (Mancini, 2023). Each snapshot was transformed into a narrative loaded with meaning, an intimate dialogue between her past self and the present, without losing the human connection with the woman portrayed.

Most of her subjects were women and children with parallel stories characterized by social tensions, misery and an uncertain future, but endowed with a tireless search for hope. According to an article published in *Meer* (2016), Battaglia acknowledged that being a woman allowed her to persevere in the profound search for the feminine soul, using the authenticity of bodies as a vehicle for expression. External appearance was not enough for her; she wanted to get beneath the skin of her subjects, to contemplate the emotions, tensions and human complexity that existed inside them, which is to say, to capture the special and intimate snapshots she longed for.

In an integral manner, she left us a visual legacy that bears witness to her society from two contrasting perspectives: the women and children of working-class neighbourhoods, full of dynamism, and the haute bourgeoisie of Palermo, whose elegance, although ostentatious, denoted signs of decadence. She was conscious of the fact that, in order to understand a society, you had to capture its contrasts. With this conviction in mind, her reflection on duality and her determination to place women in the foreground, no longer just as victims but as fighters, effectively challenged and subverted traditional narratives.

Just as Urrutia Neno and Ide Guzman stand out in their analysis of Latin American cinema, where they explore the tension between youthful innocence and the violence to which young people are exposed (Urrutia Neno & Ide Guzman, 2022), Battaglia also shows how cruelty becomes a grim playmate, as is evident in her globally iconic portraits entitled 'The Girl with the Ball' and 'The Killer's Game[8]" where the rawness of her images strips childhood of idealized stereotypes and makes a deep impression on those who observe them (Orosz, 2024).

In 2017, three decades after Claudio's murder, she revived her desire to make amends for its impact by embarking on a quest for innocence and beauty with the project 'Greta's Beauty[9]'. starring a 10-year-old girl, the same age as Claudio. This is an age that Battaglia considered a magical moment, one in which innocence is transformed into beauty, and beauty is transformed into justice (Sanmoran, 2017).

4.3 Souls Lost in the Abyss

With her multifaceted, courageous, genuine and inexhaustible personality, the civic and ethical commitment entailed by photography paired perfectly with her personal responsibility to act with integrity, fairness and respect towards others, even when it came to those "others" that no one else respected: the mentally ill, confined in phrenopathic or psychiatric hospitals, as patients in mental health clinics were called at the beginning of the twentieth century.

"In the 1980s, Battaglia, who struggled with her own psychiatric problems, according to Zecchin [photographer and her late partner, n. of a.], and often photographed patients in psychiatric institutions" (Day, 2023). For her, this environment was not hostile, but a bridge between the personal and the collective.

Each opening of her camera's diaphragm was a window that not only captured a social testimony, but also addressed the extreme importance of mental health as a pillar of human identity. Defying convention and the guardians of decorum, Battaglia unhesitatingly approached those whom society had marginalized,

[8] https://www.archivioletiziabattaglia.it/album/palermo-e-provincia/
[9] https://www.archivioletiziabattaglia.it/album/palermo-e-provincia/

deliberately ignoring the murmur of those who are enslaved by the fear of "what people will say". In addition to being groundbreaking in terms of approach, this perspective represented a profound reflection on the human condition, one that was quite rare at the time. This perspective highlights a broader philosophical and testimonial understanding of human reality, as well as a firm commitment to forgotten causes. It is valid to say that she possessed a natural ability to transform pain into art, portraying souls lost in the abyss, starting with the dignity they deserved to receive and that society had denied them. In this respect, she raised awareness of their internal struggles, those that most members of society preferred to ignore. Her visual denunciations in photographic format effectively humanized those who had been condemned to oblivion, having been reduced to mere diagnostic cases.

It is noteworthy that, in a sociocultural context where psychological disorders were ostracized as taboo, stigmatized or grotesquely ridiculed, Battaglia was ahead of her time. She was a pioneer in recognizing, seeking and demanding help when, in 1966, as a 31-year-old mother of three daughters, she became acutely aware of how deeply unhappy she was in her marriage:

> At a certain point in my life I started psychoanalysis. I was in treatment with a wonderful Freudian, whom I still thank today, for three years. I was in bad shape, I had problems, I couldn't take it anymore. I loved a boy [Santi Caleca], this boy loved me, and then I finally found the courage to leave. The psychoanalyst gave me advice, and I went to Milan, with my girls (Dominguez, 2024).

Confronting her own demons and breaking the shackles that kept her soul and psyche imprisoned was one of the many acts of emotional survival that nurtured her artistic facet, giving voice and restoring dignity to those "broken angels".

4.4. Understanding in Order to Unmask

"For years I have devoted myself to photographing corpses. We feel humiliated as a people, subdued and humiliated by this tragedy," declared Letizia Battaglia upon receiving, on October 17, 1985, the William Eugene Smith International

Award for Humanistic Photography in New York[10] the first European woman to receive it (*Society's Child*, 2022). These words encapsulate her deep commitment to photojournalism, merging her mission to expose reality with her struggle for dignity and justice.

Battaglia continually stressed the power of intention and identity in the creative process. As she stated, "having a clear identity makes all the difference. It is not the instrument that creates the work of art, but the one who moves it; it is like writing, for with the same pen you can write beautiful poems or the shopping list" (John & Sparapani, 2022). With these reflections, Battaglia not only vindicates an artistic perspective on tragedy, but also the role of the creator, who acts as a catalyst of deeper meanings that transcend pure technique.

Battaglia's photographic career began by chance. Her first photograph for the newspaper *L'Ora di Palermo* occurred when, due to the lack of photographers in the newsroom, she was sent to cover an important news story with an obsolete Leica camera, whose exposure and aperture were pre-adjusted, since she had no knowledge of photography. That same year, a friend gave her a Minolta, which marked a turning-point in her life (Mancini, 2023), although her true *companion* was the Pentax K1000 (Day, 2023). Self-taught, she studied photography while working, but despite her dedication, the technique always proved complex for her; she was endlessly wrong about timing and depth of field.

"But it takes me six months to learn how the washing machine works," Battaglia joked in an interview, acknowledging that technique was not her forte (Miglierini, 2016). However, for her, technique was never a limitation. Her art resided in creative freedom and this allowed her to move away from what she considered technical slavery, capturing the essence of what she saw through her photographic instinct.

That connection between her instinct and her work was what made her stand out in the photographic world, as the William Eugene Smith International Award for Humanistic Photography confirms, underlining her extraordinary professionalism as a photojournalist. Although she was later awarded equally

[10] https://www.instagram.com/p/Cj4qiXFjg8K/

prestigious distinctions, such as the Mother Jones Life Achievement Award (California, 1999), the Erich Salomon Prize presented by the German Photographic Society (DGPh) (Cologne, 2007) and the Cornell Capa Infinity Award presented by the International Center of Photography (New York, 2009), and was included amongst the thousand candidates for the Nobel Peace Prize, she was never awarded the *Word Press Photo* (WPP) Award. Neither was she valued by the Magnum Photos and VU agencies, both of which are associated with the aesthetic "canon" that brings together authentic, personal and sincere proposals such as Battaglia's (Blanco, 2022b).

The first prize, the William Eugene Smith International Award, was a key milestone both for her and for humanity. For her, this was well-deserved recognition of her professional life philosophy, rooted in the conviction that equality and justice are not luxuries, but vital necessities. For humanity, it positioned her as a beacon of social justice through her art, preventing the memory of the victims from fading into indifference or oblivion. For as Bourdieu (2003) has pointed out, photography is more than just a form of artistic expression. It is also a social tool capable of interpreting and transforming harsh reality, something Letizia achieved with a series of images that required action in the face of oppressive powers.

Before receiving this first award in New York, Battaglia's work was almost invisible outside Palermo, even though she was part of the small group of professionals who dared to document the massacres of the Corleonesi[11]. She was the only female photojournalist, not only in Palermo, but in the whole of Italy; the only woman to wield a camera, enriching the narrative discourse and laying the foundations for a new social paradigm for future generations (Colorado Nates, 2013). Driven by a deep vocation, a coherent ethical approach coherence and feminist activism: "I remember that at the beginning even the police wanted to stop me from working, because I was a blonde, cute, I was cute, I wore these dresses back then, and they didn't like it" she said (Day, 2023). For her, photography went beyond the realm of art: it was a means of knowledge and social integration and an expression of collective identity (Bourdieu, 2003, pp.

[11] https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cqlge35735po

155-162). Battaglia is a woman whose legacy will continue to inspire new generations of photographers to fight for their ideals, using their art as an instrument of social change and justice and reformulating the concept of struggle as an act of ethical and aesthetic opposition, one far removed from any kind of violence.

Battaglia recalled that after winning this prestigious award she received invitations from many countries to exhibit her work, although, paradoxically, none came from Italy (Mancini, 2023). By that time, she had already become a little better known in her country: in June 1979, fate decreed that she would be the photographer who captured the politician, Giulio Andreotti, leaving the Hotel Zagarella with the mafioso, Nino Salvo, an image that was used years later as evidence in Andreotti's trial. Despite this, six years later, Italy did not even consider asking her for an exhibition after the award. But by then it was too late: Battaglia had already organized her own, even if it was not one of those exhibitions where canapés and polite smiles flow as freely as champagne.

Aware that in order to understand and make people understand the Sicilian situation in all its complexity she would have to begin to forge the necessary force for change that might dismantle the Mafia, she set up an exhibition showing images of Mafia brutality and unbridled violence in Palermo. The exhibition took place on a Sunday in 1978, at the height of the "years of lead" in Palermo, in the main Square of Corleone, at the epicentre of the Sicilian Mafia:

> As soon as we got there, everyone came to see what those photos were. As soon as they saw that one of them was of Luciano Leggio, the capo of the Corleonesi, their neighbour from Corleone, arrested, in handcuffs, the square emptied immediately (Day, 2023).

Given that her rebellion against the slavery of the Sicilian dictatorship of fear was directly proportional to her tireless commitment, the same year as the exhibition that highlighted the city's complicit silence in the Square of Corleone, Battaglia went a step further and, together with Zecchin, founded the *Photographic Information* agency in Palermo. The agency was popularly known as *If,* because this is the acronym for "photographic information", but is also an explicit reference to the film *If*.... (Anderson, 1968), which alludes to resistance in the face

of aggression and injustice (Lombardo, 2017). This forum was a space frequented by figures such as Josef Delka and Fernando Scianna, and it was also the place where famous photographers were trained, including Shobha Battaglia, one of Letizia's daughters, who, like her mother, developed a deep passion for photography.

5. Conclusions

FIRST:

Political activism and denunciation of the consequences of a corrupt and violent State led by the Mafia are the two aspects that shape the figure of the street photographer, Letizia Battaglia, who portrayed the dead and other victims of the conflict. Her lack of dependence on planning led her to capture a series of decisive moments in the daily lives of ordinary citizens by showing the peripheral consequences of the Mafia's core activities. In this respect, the photographs we have brought together in this article are samples of photojournalism, samples that avoid reductionist clichés and do not encompass the realm of post-photography, a term coined by Fontcuberta to describe the capture of public spaces in cities with the use of smartphones. [...] Sometimes you get the feeling that all the components of an image are there except for one thing that is missing. But what is missing? [...]. You wait and wait, and finally you press the button (Cartier- Bresson, 1981).

SECOND:

Regarding the analysis proposals that we put forward in the article, we have established a photographic corpus in three parts created by Battaglia, which has enabled us to understand that there is something more in the artist's photographs, something that constitutes a metaphor: photography as a hidden metaphor, one that represents an exceptional risk for society. The new generations can be seduced by a phenomenon that they do not understand, since they are not mature enough to understand the reductionist forms of salvation proposed by the Mafia. The Mafia effectively won the battle to recruit the youth who were forgotten by a system that excluded and ignored them. These

characteristics are all contained in the photographs that we have proposed as examples.

The more than 600,000 photographs that make up her archive are not just depictions of specific moments, but veritable reflections of the suffering, the struggle, the resilience and the hope of an entire people who refused to be silenced. Her creations go beyond the limits of conventional photography, emerging as an ethical and aesthetic statement that invites us to reflect on life, death and collective memory.

THIRD:

The Mafia sought to suppress Battaglia by threatening her. The artist was not a war photojournalist; she transcended the phenomenon of violence because she set her mind on unmasking the truth. Battaglia's photography is not mere reportage, since there is an intellectual process behind her work. The Mafia perfectly understood the environment and the society in which it operated, detecting it immediately. Hence the consequences of “killing” judges such as Borselino and Falcone and the threats against the culture and truth that the medium of photography represented. Battaglia was not merely denouncing a reality, but following an intellectual process: that of unmasking. She removed the mask, just as Dario Fo did in the Berlusconi case, presenting them as they are. Although Battaglia's photographs go beyond plain images, they managed to encapsulate the omnipresence of death that existed beneath the indifference with which the loss of life was accepted in her city, where violence was routine and attempts to escape or progress were futile. Her extraordinary ability allowed her to find, even in the most devastating tragedies, a spark of hope, a love of life that flickered behind the denunciation. She always maintained a firm ethic, avoiding anything that might have been considered gruesome and lurid, and giving voice and dignity to those she photographed, even in death.

FOURTH:

Documenting the social injustices she witnessed, Battaglia addressed issues such as environmental protection, difficult social realities and, mainly, the consent,

indifference, silence and hypocritical complicity of institutions in the face of such injustices (Sweigart, 2016).

She also used her art to shed light on social clichés, especially in relation to mental health. Not only did she reflect her personal stance on this issue, but her photographs became spotlights that shed light on realities that many preferred to ignore. Battaglia was a pioneer in using her camera as a subversive tool to show a reality that, at best, would have remained hidden.

At the same time, it is essential to reflect on the narco-mafioso subgenre in film and photography, which unites narratives of violence and power in equally harsh contexts. Linking Battaglia's work with images of current Latin American drug traffickers allows us to see barbarism as a global phenomenon and the photojournalist as an indispensable agent of denunciation and recollection in the face of impunity (Blanco, 2020b). In this respect, Brandt argues that photographic narratives not only document, but also reinterpret and challenge visual conventions, especially in contexts characterized by intimidation (Brandt, 2024).

However, for Battaglia, dealing with the emotional and psychological impact that her art entailed was not an easy task, since, as she once commented, she felt "imprisoned in the role of photographer with which she photographed the civil war of her land" (Ranzani, 2022).

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Translator: Mark Oakley