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David Seymour's Album on the Fight against Illiteracy in Calabria as a Tool of Mediatization: Material Traces of Editing and Visual Storytelling

1. Introduction

The digitization of the UNESCO Archives has brought to light a hitherto unknown photography album (containing contact sheets, comments, and captions) on the social, economic, political, and cultural context of illiteracy in Italy, which was made for UNESCO in 1950 by Magnum co-founder David Seymour.¹ Seymour at the time was also famous for his photography essays on the Spanish Civil War and his reportages on children in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War.²

¹ The album is accessible online at <https://digital.archives.unesco.org/en/collection/photos/detail/16ea6d91-6ccb-a22f-6211-4bdd992291cb/media/2544d484-67f4-18c3-5e62-ad38466c02bc>; UNESCO Archives ref.: AG 12, Photo Albums, 1 – [Seymour – Calabre], 1950. On the wider archival context of David Seymour's album, see the essay by Giovanna Hendel in this volume. On the history of education and the visual history of the fight against illiteracy in Southern Italy, see also Roberto Sani, *Education, School and Cultural Processes in Contemporary Italy* (Macerata: EUM – Edizioni Università di Macerata, 2018); Juri Meda, "'Invisible Schools': The Public Image of Rural Schools in Southern Italy in Photographic Inquiries and Photo-Reportages (1925–55)," *Historia y Memoria de la Educación* 8 (2018): 347–96.

² See Carole Naggar, *David Seymour* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2011); Carole Naggar, *Chim: Children of War* (New York: Umbrage, 2013); Carole Naggar, "A Second Look: Chim's Children of War," *Time*, January 16, 2013, <http://time.com/3796013/a-second-look-chims-children-of-war/#1>; Carole Naggar, *David Seymour: Vies de Chim* (Biarritz: Contrejour, 2014); Carole Naggar: "Unravelling a 70-Year-Old Photographic Mystery," *Time Lightbox*, April 12, 2017, <http://time.com/4735368/tereska-david-chim-seymour/>; Carole Naggar, *Tereska and Her Photographer* (New York: Russet Lederman, 2019); Karin Priem and Frederik Herman, "Photographs as Living and Entangled Objects: David Seymour's Children of Europe," in *The Visual in Educational History: Transnational Reflections on the Practice of History in the Digital Age*, ed. Tim Allender, Inés Dussel, Ian Grosvenor, and Karin Priem (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming). See also the following publications by UNESCO: "UNESCO Begins Photo Survey of War-Hit Nations," *UNESCO Courier* 1, no. 4 (1948): 3; "New International Agency to Help War Orphans," *UNESCO Courier* 1, no. 7 (1948): 1–2; "These Are Children of Europe: Dismal Serenade," *UNESCO Courier* 2, no. 1 (1949): 5; "The Children of Europe, a UNESCO Photo Story," *UNESCO Courier* 2, no. 1 (1949): 1, 5–9; *Children of Europe: Photos by David Seymour*, UNESCO Publication no. 403

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In March 1950, David Seymour, much inspired by the Italian writer and painter Carlo Levi, started on an ambitious reportage on illiteracy, then a major problem in Southern Italy.³ On assignment for UNESCO, he visited a number of remote villages in the region of Calabria: Roggiano Gravina, Bagaladi, Saucchi, San Nicola de Crissa, Cimino, and Capistrano. His journey resulted in a photography album containing approximately 540 pictures and also led to the publication of an article by Carlo Levi in the March 1952 issue of the *UNESCO Courier*, accompanied by several of Seymour's photographs with extended captions.⁴

After the Second World War, promotional materials issued by humanitarian agencies featured many photographs on Europe's reconstruction and related educational initiatives. Because of their "media plasticity," photographic images were included and appeared in various media campaigns and across different media to invite and influence debate and opinion formation and to define what mattered in the public sphere.⁵ Photography played a key role in this process, as its power derives from its capacity to provide a human face to issues and events and to capture and make visible specific moments that otherwise would be forgotten in the flow of time.⁶ In addition, the technological dimensions of photography facilitated the institutional production and management of visibility and knowledge by means of reproduction. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call "the representation of one medium in another *remediation*" and photographic images commissioned by humanitarian agencies indeed (re-)appeared – often in refashioned ways – within many contexts and media.⁷

The publication of Seymour's photographs by UNESCO was highly selective – only twelve photographs, out of a total of approximately 540, were published in the *UNESCO Courier*. UNESCO obviously was not inclined to publish a huge reportage.

(Paris: UNESCO, 1949); Thérèse Brosse, *Homeless Children*, UNESCO Publication no. 573 (Paris: UNESCO, 1950).

3 On the collaboration between David Seymour and Carlo Levi, see the essay by Carole Naggar in this volume.

4 Carlo Levi, "Southern Italy Fights the Battle against Illiteracy," *UNESCO Courier* 5, no. 3 (1952): 3–5.

5 The term "media plasticity" has been used by Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites to describe a major feature of photographs, referring to the fact that the medium allows various usages in processes of mediation and remediation. See Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *The Public Image: Photography and Civic Spectatorship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 13; see also Lilie Chouliaraki and Tijana Stolic, "Rethinking Media Responsibility in the Refugee 'Crisis': A Visual Typology of European News," *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 8 (2017): 1162–77; Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

6 John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Co-Op, 1980); Stuart Franklin, *The Documentary Impulse* (London: Phaidon Press, 2016).

7 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 45 (*italics in the original*).

Seymour usually worked on a very low budget and expected the photographic cooperative Magnum to further promote the photographs across different media, also featuring texts by Carlo Levi.⁸

2. The Album “Italy Fights the Battle Against Illiteracy” as an Editing Tool

Before analyzing Seymour’s way of visual storytelling, I would like to take a closer look at the album as an object and at the material traces it provides.⁹ The album of Seymour’s contact sheets is neither an official nor a personal album; it rather looks like a professionally created working tool for media campaigns.¹⁰

The album starts with a caption that doubles as a general introduction emphasizing the album’s focus on the fight against illiteracy in Calabria. It also includes clippings on carbon paper with numbered comments on the photographs of the contact sheets of about 30 medium-format film rolls, most of which feature 12 negatives each (adding up to a total of 352 medium-format photographs). The numerical order of the comments on carbon paper does not seem to follow the chronological order in which the photographs were taken, the latter of which is indicated by the consecutive numbering of the negatives. Rather, by compiling the album and adding comments and captions, Seymour made specific decisions on how to create several

8 Carlo Levi published several newspaper articles on the political and social problems in Calabria, some of which appeared in the *New York Times*: “Peasants Stir in Groping Italy,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1947; “For Freedom We Must Conquer Fear,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1948; “Eboli Revisited: New Life Stirs,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1949; “Italy Fights the Battle of Illiteracy,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1949; and “Italy’s Peasants Look at Land Reform,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1953. Carole Naggar’s essay in this volume provides some insights into Seymour’s and Levi’s battle for media attention for the situation in Calabria.

9 For more information on the specific quality of historical albums as visual objects and on the analysis of photographic images as entangled and social objects, see Anne-Marie Garat, *Photos de familles* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1994); Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001); Elizabeth Edwards, “Entangled Documents: Visualized Histories,” in *Susan Meiselas: In History*, ed. Kristen Lubben (New York: International Center for Photography; Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2008), 330–41; Elizabeth Edwards, “Photographs: Material Form and the Dynamic Archive,” in *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*, ed. Costanza Caraffa (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2011), 47–56.

10 The album is a ring binder which is identical to others used by UNESCO to assemble contact sheets received from photographers. Most probably, David Seymour delivered the comments, captions, and contact sheets to UNESCO where they were put into the ring binder. The Magnum Archives in New York contain a black album – this type of album was used for all Magnum photographers – with the same content.

sequences and interconnected stories out of the larger collection of photographs.¹¹ His focus was not on providing a linear timeline of his visual exploration of Southern Italy, even though the chronological order of the photographs was still in place. Instead, he constructed specific storylines and selected specific photographs to go with and support these storylines. In addition to the medium-format contact sheets assembled in the first part of the album, additional layers of time and content were represented by a large number of small-format negatives (taken with Seymour's Leica) which made up the second half of the album. These contact sheets of small-format film rolls were organized by consecutive numbers ("L. 1" to "L. 8") and included many duplicates of the medium-format pictures besides more spontaneous photographs of everyday life. Here, however, the album provides fewer comments and captions. In sum, the album shows that its compiler, David Seymour, not only meant to give advice on how to arrange the film rolls into stories, but that he also wanted to highlight specific aspects of these stories by adding captions to selected photographs to help the editors construct exactly the stories he wished to tell. To this end, he made certain decisions, which are revealed by editing traces on the surface of the album. These traces bring to light how Seymour thought the album should work and how the photographs ought to be perceived by editors and viewers. The album thus not only functioned as an editing tool, but also as a communication tool both between the photographer and his editors and between the photographer, the editor, and a public audience.¹²

3. Leafing Through: The Photographer in Conversation with His Editors

The album "Italy Fights the Battle Against Illiteracy," the result of Seymour's contracted project with UNESCO, demonstrates that Seymour approached the UNESCO assignment from a broader perspective: He acted as a sensitive and respectful observer who, in addition to giving us wonderful pictures of people and everyday life and landscapes in Calabria, through his photographs also commented on issues such as education and learning activities, the role of women, the lack of infrastructure, and the peasants' fight against poverty.

¹¹ I would like to thank Carole Naggar for providing important information on David Seymour's authorship of these comments and captions. Evidence is provided by the ongoing technical failure of Seymour's typewriter as well as by the fact that his writing style (including the mistakes made by a non-native English speaker) is consistent with his other reportages in the 1950s.

¹² It should be noted that the album also contains several comments in pencil, which were most probably made by Seymour's editors.

The album's story starts on the first page with a caption for a medium-format photograph (no. 2) of Roggiano Gravina, a village that Seymour described as being located in a "very poor agricultural district." As mentioned before, the long caption doubles as an introductory text, and Seymour noted that the children's school attendance in the village had recently increased to almost one hundred percent and that seven hundred adults were attending evening classes. According to Seymour, these achievements were the work of the *Unione Nazionale per la Lotta contro l'Analfabetismo* (National League for the Struggle Against Illiteracy). The caption mentions other successful developments initiated by the League and the cultural centers it had established:

The percentage of illiterates [sic] dropped from 68 to 22 percent in the last four years. This work is directed by the Center of Popular Culture headed by Giuseppe Zanfini who at the same time assumes the charges [sic] of the Regional Inspector for Calabria of the Unione. The Center became the real center of the village life. It is conducted in an interesting way, giving facilities to the younger ones to work in a poorly equipped workshop where educational supplies are constructed, woodcarving and basic carpentry is [sic] taught. The women are taught handicraft, embroidery, and the evening hours are split between sewing and learning.

Seymour also pointed to political tensions in Southern Italy, drawing attention to a significant aspect that was not specifically highlighted in the *UNESCO Courier* article by Carlo Levi:

Rogiano [sic] Gravina like any other town and village in Italy is bitterly split in political fights. But the Center of Popular Culture managed to maintain its apolitical status. Communists and Demo-Christians are sitting side by side on the benches and trying hard to learn. The misery is everybody's, and when the wave of land occupations swept recently through Southern Italy, Rogiano [sic] Gravina offered the uncommon spectacle of Communists with their red flag marching together with the Demo-Christians with their white flag, occupying jointly the uncultivated [sic] land of Barone Campagna, the local land-owner of over 5,000 hectares. After hard years of struggle against illiteracy [sic] Rogiano [sic] Gravina has new hopes. The Government is building a large elementary school which in the future will replace the 42 private school-rooms scattered all over the village. A piece of ground belonging to the village was granted recently to the Centro. Here the Centro plan [sic] to construct a new building containing school-rooms and workshops for the adults. But they need funds and they hope that UNESCO will help them.

On the album's first double spread, with contact sheet 50–3–9 on the right page, Seymour highlighted several photographs by providing them with captions on the left page.¹³ The first photograph (no. 4) shows the location where the new center

¹³ The contact sheet numbers indicate internal Magnum references: the year of the creation of Seymour's work (1950), the number of Magnum photography essays Seymour had made until then (3), and the consecutive number of his total number of contact sheets within the Magnum archive (9 ff.).

was to be built, and the second photograph (no. 6) shows an “old peasant” attending a writing class. In addition, there is an editorial remark on carbon paper about adult education, referring to a sequence of pictures on this first contact sheet of the album that shows old men attending an after-work writing class.

On the next double spread, the remarks on the carbon-paper clipping refer to several pictures on contact sheets 50–3–9 and 50–3–10 showing the hands of a male adult who is holding a pen for the first time. Seymour specifically selected three photographs: no. 5 from contact sheet 50–3–9 and nos. 15 and 21 from contact sheet 50–3–10. The latter are indeed very impressive pictures and have been published in the *UNESCO Courier* article, with no. 15 actually featuring as the magazine’s cover photo.

On the third contact sheet of the album (50–3–11), Seymour highlighted photographs nos. 27, 28, and 33, showing adolescents and young men attending school. The fourth contact sheet (50–3–12) is accompanied by a longer comment on carbon paper repeating some of the earlier information while adding that the peasants and their children had to walk long distances to school. It is also mentioned that “[i]nstruction is carried on in an interesting way, with many evenings devoted to general knowledge and question-and-answer periods” and that “a poorly equipped workshop permits the young men of the village to work on educational supplies such as maps, classroom furniture, basic laboratory equipment, etc.” We also learn about the founding of a musical band and an amateur theater group, and we are told that teachers were much respected and also gave regular legal advice to help peasants deal with the official authorities, and that medical doctors offered consultations at the cultural centers. The fifth contact sheet (50–3–13) comes with a comment on the high illiteracy rate among women who sometimes were taught reading and writing by embroidering letters. Another remark refers to the “mobile letter system” that was used in the classrooms. Seymour also emphasized a photograph (no. 60) showing the making of teaching materials. UNESCO, however, preferred to publish another picture of the same subject (no. 37 on the previous contact sheet).

From the sixth, uncommented contact sheet (50–3–14), Seymour chose three pictures in order to stress specific aspects of his story: one photograph (no. 64) shows a general view of the village and was published in reverse in the *UNESCO Courier*; the next (no. 68) shows a street scene in Roggiano Gravina; and the third (no. 70) is a close-up shot of the same street scene, focusing on a group of women and young girls, one of which is described by Seymour as doing her homework.

Three comments on the brevity of formal schooling were added to the seventh contact sheet (50–3–15) while stressing the importance of adult education, youth clubs, continued professional training, the creation of libraries, and the organization of general cultural events.

The eighth contact sheet (50–3–16) contains lots of photographs of women carrying heavy loads on their heads. Seymour did not comment on this motif at this

point but rather highlighted a photograph (no. 83) of the entrance to the Cultural Center of Roggiano, which later was selected for publication by UNESCO.

The ninth contact sheet (50–3–17) comes with two comments on the facing page highlighting the photograph of a teacher guiding the hand of adult learners and other pictures of writing lessons attended by old men. As for the tenth contact sheet (50–3–18), Seymour emphasized three photographs (nos. 109, 114, and 117) by adding long captions. They show the director of the cultural center helping peasants fill in official forms and reading a letter of a long-emigrated son to his illiterate mother; the caption mentions that Emilia, the mother, immediately asked for admission to the school, “so that in the future she will be able to read her son’s letter by herself.”

The next contact sheet (50–3–19) is accompanied by comments referring to women’s education and pointing out that women were often accompanied by their children when attending school. A very strong picture from this contact sheet (no. 123) was selected by UNESCO (though not highlighted by Seymour) for publication: It depicts a woman and her young daughter collaborating on a reading exercise.

Contact sheet 50–3–20 is not accompanied by a comment but contains a long caption for one of the photographs (no. 139) explaining the problem of land ownership and of making a living in Southern Italy. The picture shows Oreste Rossini, a father of five, who owned a small piece of land and regularly attended evening classes. UNESCO, however, selected another photograph (no. 135) from this contact sheet for publication, which did not refer to a specific person or specific experiences but displayed a group of men working in the field.

The next contact sheet (50–3–21) also refers to land ownership and land occupation, and Seymour highlighted five photographs (nos. 145–149) to support this specific dimension of his story. These photographs are reminiscent of his reportage of the Spanish Civil War but interestingly were not selected for publication by UNESCO.

School buildings and a woman carrying a load on her head are the subjects of the next highlighted photographs (nos. 158, 161, and 168) displayed on contact sheet 50–3–22. The caption for photograph no. 168 – of the woman carrying the load – testifies to Seymour’s desire to tell a story and give advice to the editor. It reads:

One of the many pictures of women carrying different loads on their heads. I have a general idea that these pictures can be used as sort of symbolic introduction to the story. I couldn’t find yet the verbal slogan for it, but the general idea is that people in Calabria were using their head [sic] to carry loads, and sometimes very heavy loads, and at present they are discovering that they can use their heads for education.

The comments for the fifteenth contact sheet (50–3–23) mention the complaints of the teacher Olga Natale about the school’s poor infrastructure and the problem of providing an adequate schoolroom in a village called Cimino. Here, Seymour chose

four pictures as important elements of his story. The caption for one of these photographs (no. 172) more or less repeats the information given in the general comment at the top of the page and stresses the poor construction and equipment of the schoolrooms. The open door of the schoolroom directs the viewer's gaze to a young boy tending sheep – a motif that links the picture to the other three selected pictures (nos. 178–180) on this contact sheet, showing romantic images of a young shepherd while at the same time hinting at child labor. The contact sheet (50–3–24) includes more photographs of the schoolroom and the young shepherd in Cimino and is accompanied by a short comment. It is worth noting that one photograph (no. 190) from this contact sheet (its caption referring to child labor) was highlighted by Seymour at a later stage of the album in connection with a sequence on the teacher Antonio Janni. The seventeenth contact sheet (50–3–25) again shows classroom scenes – Seymour highlighted photograph no. 193 – and a stunning portrait of a young boy (no. 197) that was selected for publication by UNESCO.

The next, eighteenth contact sheet (50–3–26) shows pictures of a very impressive old woman and of two girls presumably on their way to school next to pictures of adult education classes. Seymour drew attention to a heart-warming photograph (no. 210) of a father doing writing exercises, sitting next to his son who was full of life and curiosity.

The next double spread, featuring contact sheet 50–3–27, contains captions for three photographs (nos. 219, 224, and 226). On the left page, we see additional traces of editing. One of the captions (for photograph no. 226) introduces Antonio Janni, a teacher who had lost his American citizenship because he had fought with the Italian army during the war and now had to travel sixteen kilometers every day to reach the village schools. The following contact sheet (50–3–28) is also dedicated to Antonio Janni and his role outside and inside the classrooms. To match the two comments about Antonio Janni and the poorly constructed school buildings, Seymour highlighted three photographs (nos. 190, 191, and 236), two of which were part of an earlier contact sheet. Photograph no. 239, showing Janni standing in the middle of the classroom, was not highlighted by Seymour but selected for publication by UNESCO.

The twenty-first contact sheet (50–3–29) focuses on the landscape and the long distances both young and old had to travel to reach the classrooms. A comment informed editors that the paths were very dangerous in wintertime. The next double spread (50–3–30) repeats this information and also includes captions for four selected photographs (nos. 262, 256, 259, and 299), one of which (no. 299) can be found on a subsequent contact sheet of the album. Picture no. 256, showing the simple interior of a peasant's house, was selected for publication by UNESCO. The next contact sheet (50–3–31) shows houses and families without any comments. The caption for one of the photographs on this contact sheet (no. 276) is placed on the left page of the next double spread ("A view of Saucchi with the clouds covering the mountain peaks"), where Seymour added two more captions for pictures on con-

tact sheet 50–3–32: a photograph (no. 278) of children pushing the teacher's (Antonio Janni's) scooter and a photograph (no. 261) of children walking in a mountain area. But there is also another comment referring to Antonio Janni: "This is his first year as teacher in the school at Saucchi – he inherited the job from his cousin who got pneumonia and died, probably from exhaustion. This is no wonder because the job is extremely hard." The rest of the comment repeats the information given in an earlier caption where the teacher is described for the first time.

The next double spread (which includes contact sheet 50–3–33) shows poor dwellings – Seymour highlighted picture no. 309 from a later contact sheet (50–3–38) to show the poor conditions of peasants' dwellings – and several photographs of a young boy holding a horse. The comment indicates that one of the biggest problems connected to illiteracy is child labor. On contact sheet 50–3–34, Seymour emphasized three photographs (nos. 314, 324, and 319). The captions refer to women and children "us[ing] their heads" for carrying loads and to a family working in the field. Contact sheet 50–3–35 and two of the three highlighted photographs from it (nos. 328 and 330) again refer to women carrying loads – one of Seymour's favorite subjects. UNESCO selected picture no. 330 for publication and therefore followed Seymour's storyline, but their caption was less provocative than Seymour's comments. A third highlighted picture (no. 334) shows an utterly idyllic image for a change: "Children shepherds on the road to Spezzano Albanese." Seymour emphasized three pictures from contact sheet 50–3–36 (nos. 345, 346, and 338), again showing a young shepherd and Oreste Rossini attending evening school. The two comments referring to this contact sheet explain that young boys are not able to attend school because they have to watch their families' sheep. Picture no. 338, featuring Oreste Rossini in the background, was published by UNESCO.

The next contact sheet (50–3–37) shows the Calabrian landscape, and Seymour selected all photographs as important visualizations of his story. Contact sheet 50–3–38 is accompanied by two comments on the difficult infrastructure of the region due to the lack of roads, and it must be noted that this last medium-format contact sheet is the only one that disrupts the consecutive numbering of the negatives.

The album's second part consists of small-format film contact sheets that show pictures of everyday life – it seems that Seymour here took advantage of the flexibility of his smaller Leica. In this part, fewer photographs were selected to accompany his story – one reason may have been that many of the photographs were duplicates of the medium-format photographs. Only one small-format picture (no. 8 on the fifth Leica contact sheet) was selected for publication by UNESCO. It shows a street scene of two boys and a donkey, with a car in the background.

By leafing through the album, one discovers that its making played a key role in shaping and creating appealing narratives for the fight against illiteracy in Southern Italy. It is thus neither chronology nor the truth-value of photography but rather the photographer's encounters and experiences with real-life people that add new perspectives to history. Seymour visually captured people's lives and environments,

stressed their historical importance by compiling the album, and thus told unique, insightful stories that otherwise would be forgotten.

4. Conclusion: Photography as a Technology of Mediating Humanitarian Causes

I think we can safely say that the album functioned as an editing tool and a means of communication between the photographer and his editors. However, it was not David Seymour but his editors who made the final decisions on which narrative clusters would be stressed, who would become a publicly known figure with a name and a face, and which pictures would be used to trigger and shape public debate. By compiling the album, Seymour aimed to tell various stories without paying attention to the chronology of his work as a photographer. Through captions and comments, he created overlapping storylines that functioned as flexible elements of the same toolkit: the album. Some of these storylines are: (1) the peasants' occupation of land to fight poverty, featuring as the main protagonist Oreste Rossini who was also an enthusiastic attendee of the evening school; (2) the lack of infrastructure, which was documented by pictures of poorly constructed school buildings, home-made teaching materials, and the lack of roads; (3) the story of the teacher Antonio Janni and his role in the community; (4) the general lack of intellectual stimulation and educational opportunities for girls and women symbolized by the heavy loads they carried on their heads; and, finally, (5) the problem of child labor.

In conclusion, let's take a brief look at Carlo Levi's article in the March 1952 issue of the *UNESCO Courier* to see how the case of Southern Italy's fight against illiteracy was mediated (differently) through institutional editing.¹⁴ After first mentioning that the most recent statistics on illiteracy in Southern Italy date back to 1931 and thus are not really up to date, Levi goes on to sketch the causes and interconnected issues of illiteracy – the absence of democratic political structures in this region, the lack of cultivated land, poor sanitary conditions, the prevalence of malaria, the lack of businesses and industries, and, finally, people's lack of access to media and the villages' poor public infrastructure. Levi also stresses the richness of the peasant culture based on oral traditions, whereas the written word, in Levi's phrase, "is for the peasants a symbol of the remoteness of the central Government,

¹⁴ In fact, the article published in the *UNESCO Courier* was identical to the one Levi had already published in the *New York Times*; see Levi, "Italy Fights the Battle of Illiteracy." However, the *New York Times* article was illustrated with five photographs by John Swope (1908–1979), who also worked for *Life Magazine*.

of a feudal bond which has never grown into a right to full citizenship.”¹⁵ While he highlights the lack of school buildings and of teaching materials and publications for children and adults, Levi also emphasizes the people’s immense enthusiasm for education in order to improve their situation and to become respected citizens. He concludes by describing the successful work of the National League for the Struggle Against Illiteracy and of the “local village Committees to Battle Illiteracy.”¹⁶ The eleven photographs that accompany the article came with short summaries adapted from the comments and captions provided by Seymour. UNESCO’s selection of the pictures did not consistently follow Seymour’s insightful visual observations and textual comments but preferred to offer a more neutral perspective.

Nevertheless, there are obviously several overlapping themes in Seymour’s and Levi’s stories. While Seymour worked as a respectful and observing “friend” of the people and was mostly concerned with documenting lived life, Levi took a more intellectual, analytical approach. Seymour’s photographs accompanying Levi’s text thus served as tools to provide faces, places, and activities as extended ongoing and lived moments that continue to involve and reach out to various audiences to this day.¹⁷

David Phillips has described documentary photography as representing a “combination of evidence and instruction” that “necessarily entails various rhetorical and aesthetic techniques that combine fact with feeling, information with effect, and factuality with polemic.”¹⁸ It must be stated, however, that this does not do full justice to how photography actually works. In fact, not much attention has been paid to what photography does as a technology in its own right. This is especially true in the domain of humanitarian photography, which naturally invites a focus on the ethical and affective dimensions of its contents. However, it is necessary to open up new horizons of research by looking at humanitarian photography also from a “material-hermeneutic” perspective and by analyzing it as a practice and technology that carries “historical and moral weight.”¹⁹ Drawing on studies in the philosophy of technology, this research perspective specifically sheds light on the hidden

¹⁵ Levi, “Southern Italy Fights the Battle against Illiteracy,” 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷ See Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007). The British art critic, poet, writer, and painter John Berger described photographs as living objects: “Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of people making their own history, then all photographs would re-acquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments.” See Berger, *About Looking*, 57.

¹⁸ David Philipps, “Actuality and Affect in Documentary Photography,” In *Using Visual Evidence*, ed. Richard Howells and Robert Matson (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press, 2009), 64.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Edwards, “Photography and the Material Performance of the Past,” *History and Theory* 48 (2009): 130, 135.

or even erased technological and material aspects of interpretation and meaning-making.²⁰ Applying this perspective to photographic albums makes it possible to analyze photographs as entangled networks of meaning-making, which present, translate, and weave together the world in specific ways. This means that we need to focus on the physical “lives” of photographs, analyze their complex contexts, material inscriptions and appearances, and investigate their making and specific handling as material, assembled, reproducible, and mobile objects.²¹ This implies focusing not so much on a “symptomatic reading” – extracting meaning by interpreting individual photographs – but by scrutinizing the tangible features of photographs – that is, the materiality, technology, and various manifestations of photography.²² Indeed, visual research should map and analyze the manifest and interwoven structures of vast bodies of photographs and deliver new knowledge on how humanitarian or educational causes were created as a result of photography’s material and technical dimensions and related processes of meaning-making.

20 Don Ihde, *Expanding Hermeneutics: Visualism in Science* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

21 Here I am thinking mostly of the work done by photography historian Elizabeth Edwards. See Elizabeth Edwards, “Photographs and the Sound of History,” *Visual Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (2005): 27–45; and footnotes 9 and 19 of this essay for more of her works.

22 Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21; Arun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).