

Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies
Volume 9 Number 2

© 2021 Intellect Ltd Archival Notes. English language.
https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms_00067_7

ARCHIVAL NOTES

MONICA JANSEN
Utrecht University

The Publifoto Agency Collection (CSAC, Parma): Interview with Claudia Cavatorta, curator of the photographic section, Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione (CSAC), University of Parma

1. Arturo Carlo Quintavalle (b. 1936) was for decades a key figure among Italian art historians, not only as an academic associated with the University of Parma, but also as a public intellectual known for his columns published in the weekly *Panorama* and for his decades-long collaboration with the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. In 1968 he founded CSAC and co-directed it with his wife Gloria Bianchino until 1989.
2. https://www.infoaiipi.org/siena_18/siena_18.pdf. Accessed 26 July 2020. Cavatorta (2020: 111–18) later turned her talk into an essay, published in 2020.
3. This interview was conducted via e-mail on 3 June 2020. The English translation of

The Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione (CSAC) is an archive and research centre at the University of Parma that was founded by art history professor Arturo Carlo Quintavalle in 1968.¹ Its holdings include unique collections of photographs, architectural drawings, design projects, fashion drawings and costumes, and works of fine and graphic art. CSAC routinely organizes public exhibitions and publishes the related catalogues. Consultation of the archive's materials is open to anyone with a scholarly interest in the collections. Since 2007, CSAC has had its base at the Valsereana Abbey, a short bus-ride away from the Parma train station.

I had the pleasure of meeting Claudia Cavatorta at the 2018 AIPI (Associazione Italiana Professori di Italiano) (Italian Association of Teachers of Italian) conference in Siena. She gave a fascinating talk on the Publifoto Agency's Rome Collection.² As an archivist and CSAC curator of the photographic section, Claudia has firsthand access to the Publifoto Agency Collections that CSAC had been acquiring from the 1980s until 2008. In this interview Claudia Cavatorta introduces us to CSAC, to its photographic repositories and, specifically, to the exceptional holdings of the Publifoto Collections which have long remained untapped sources of evidence for film and media scholars.³

Monica Jansen: *Claudia, could you tell us about the CSAC photography section?*

Claudia Cavatorta: CSAC is a university archive that collects materials related to the domain of communication, understood in the widest possible sense. In its view all the visual arts, including photography, advertisements,



Figure 1: Valsereana Abbey (Paradigna, Parma), CSAC offices and exhibition venue © CSAC-Università di Parma.



Figure 2: Carlo Cisventi, Milan: Residential Neighbourhood under Construction, c.1960. b/w photographic print, silver bromide gelatine. 230 × 291 mm paper. CSAC Università di Parma – Archivio Cisventi. © CSAC Università di Parma.

architecture and fashion design, are part of the same field of communication. As an institution CSAC anticipated what some decades later would become the fashionable research field of Visual Studies. At the centre of our institution and of this fairly recent intellectual tradition is the idea that a scientific study of works of visual communication should result from a synchronic and diachronic approach that accounts for the whole context of communication. Thus, a good analysis should give special attention to social, economic and anthropological factors, including those that are overtly ideological, and adopt a different research method beyond those practised by historiography and art history. Right from the start, the approach to photography showcased how CSAC intended to operate. Quintavalle was in close dialogue with archivists and curators who specialized in photography, both at the Museum of Modern Art (John Szarkowski) and at the Library of Congress, and who viewed the medium as a community's cultural resource. Unsurprisingly, CSAC Collections strive to preserve the *integrity* of visual works since only this approach allows for the reconstruction and critical analysis of the original cultural contexts.

the original Italian is by
Giorgio Bertellini and
Monica Jansen.

MJ: *What does the CSAC photography section offer to the readers of JICMS, who are international scholars of Italian cinema and media culture?*

4. <https://www.arshake.com/en/discovered-objects-archives-for-a-department-store>. Accessed 26 July 2020.

CC: I think it is important for an archive to preserve different kinds of photographs to maintain the readability of the production context. Our holdings include artists' donations, commercial photography, collections of industrial and architectural photographs as well as historical artefacts, including daguerreotypes, collodion negatives and stereoscopic photographs. The wealth of these materials encourages scholars to adopt an anti-hierarchical approach to visual culture, confronting photography with other media, according to a philosophy that is evident in the exhibitions and studies that the Centro promotes. CSAC's affiliation with the University of Parma facilitates the exchange of different competences and perspectives: art historians interact with architects, sociologists with film scholars and so forth. Students' engaged presence and participation at CSAC through internships and research further and enrich the Centro's activities.

MJ: *One of the biggest repositories of photojournalism is the Publifoto Collection which consists of Archivio Publifoto Milano and Archivio Publifoto Roma. How were they acquired and why were they brought to Parma?*

CC: In the mid-1970s, CSAC began to acquire the Publifoto Collection (both its Milanese and Roman divisions, plus such 'satellite' ones as Publifoto Sportivo and Fototecnica, dedicated respectively to sport and industry). At that time many photojournalism agencies had great difficulty adjusting to the rapidly changing media landscape and picture market. On CSAC's behalf, Quintavalle first acquired the commercial archive of Publifoto – hundreds of thousands of publicity materials and industrial photographs – which the agency did not use anymore, but which had tremendous value as documents of Italy's material history. In those years CSAC was pretty much alone in these rescue operations, but that made it easier for agencies to trust that their commercially obsolete collections would be preserved. Eventually, CSAC acquired negatives from other sectors of Publifoto, including news and sports, as well as the archives of many of the agency's external collaborators. One of them was Carlo Cisventi (1929–88), a remarkable Milanese photojournalist, who documented the city's industrial and demographic transformations throughout the 1950s and 1960s and captured some extraordinary portraits of individual artists and social groups.

MJ: *What does the collection of Publifoto Roma contain? How can it be accessed, how is it organized?*

CC: Over the years Publifoto expanded its national footprint through different divisions, located in various Italian cities, which are relatively autonomous from one another, with their own mission, organization and external collaborators. At CSAC the challenge with preservation and cataloguing has been to enhance access to thousands of Publifoto images without losing sight of each photograph's origin and purpose. Publifoto Roma had a special interest in political news and motion pictures, and it contributed to a mainstream, institution-friendly visual rendering of Italian trade, fashion and religious ceremonies. That was at the centre of its versatility. For instance, consider the 2017 exhibition of Publifoto Roma's 1960s coverage of the display windows of one of Italy's first department stores, La Rinascente, established in 1865 but renamed as such in 1917. Entitled *Objets trouvés: Archivi per un grande magazzino (Found Objects: Archives for a Great Department Store)*, the exhibition included architectural drawings, and designs of the exhibition spaces and of the ready-to-wear clothing therein marketed (itself a novelty in Italy).⁴ This broad approach was meant to offer visitors and researchers alike a comprehensive understanding of how new large-scale commercial and exhibition practices were shaping Italian consumer culture. Another example concerns

the paparazzi coverage of American movie stars arriving at Fiumicino Airport. Their mass-mediated visibility was meant to support and showcase the mutually beneficial alliance of Hollywood with Cinecittà (re-named 'Hollywood on the Tiber'). Similarly, the casting of popular Italian film actors for Coca-Cola advertisements added another transnational element to this chapter of Italian cultural, economic and political history.

***MJ:** What is the relevance of the Publifoto Roma Collection for film and media historians? Could you tell us more on the origins and purpose of the Rome based agency, its relationship with the regime and the Istituto Luce, its development from the 1930s to the 1990s?*

CC: During the Fascist period, Publifoto photographers regularly found themselves working alongside colleagues from the Istituto Luce. Following the regime's precise instructions to the press, the selection of official viewpoints and subject matter was often identical. After the Second World War, the similarities between the work of the two organizations gave away to marked differences. Photo archivists are trained to identify them as well as to make sense of the way the Agency catalogued its vast production. Originally Publifoto adopted a thematic order for its prints, distributing them in corresponding folders. At CSAC, we value this ordering criterion as historical evidence and decided to photograph the original folders since their subjects are historically and culturally significant. Beyond the emphasis on subject matter – and while working as archeologists concerned with historical stratification, access and preservation – we also developed a chronological ordering of the sequences of negatives. Scholars can thus conduct their research along either thematic or historical tracks. Consider the case of neo-realism and its impact. The way Publifoto had organized its materials was to extract and collect negatives belonging to different epochs in order to recompose, in the 1950s, a narrative of Italy in line with the contemporary understanding and appreciation of neo-realism. Scholars today can also return each image to its own context.

***MJ:** Could you give us some examples of periods, themes and photographers that could be particularly interesting to investigate?*

CC: Each period is interesting. The end of Fascism, but also the 1960s, has inspired exhibitions at CSAC. Often Publifoto is involved in initiatives that showcase interconnections between Italian and American cultures. I am not just referring to Coca-Cola advertisements. Consider the reportages commissioned by the United States Information Service (USIS), a governmental agency that at the time controlled the media coverage of the economic and political relationships among NATO allies, including the phenomenon of migration. In this respect, Publifoto documented repeatedly the public appearances of US diplomats, especially Ambassador Claire Booth Luce, on the occasion of her participation at official and cultural events in mid-1950s Italy.

***MJ:** For what kind of research the CSAC Publifoto Collection has been used?*

CC: The Publifoto Collection has been used by historians working on different periods of Italian material and public history. A complete list of research topics would be difficult, but they include visual and political history, automotive engineering, fashion and popular culture and vernacular architecture. I remember that a few scientists inspected photographs of 1960s building sites in order to prepare for the dismantling of the first Italian thermonuclear facility in Latina, decommissioned in 1987. More recently, others came to study photographs of the construction of the Morandi Bridge (1963–67) in Genoa,

5. <https://www.csacparma.it/mostra-1968-un-anno>. Accessed 26 July 2020.
6. www.csacparma.it. Accessed 26 July 2020.
7. Gino Prato was an Italian shoemaker who had emigrated to the United States, was the winner of a popular American television contest, and after 30 years in America returned to Italy as a millionaire to visit Rome and his native town.

which tragically collapsed in 2018, possibly to best prepare for its June 2019 demolition. Besides its significant documentary value, the CSAC Publifoto Collection reveals the history of how visual media have shaped an Italian way of looking. I will give you an example: We recently organized an exhibition on the culture of 1968.⁵ It centred on the comparison between Publifoto's historical coverage of political demonstrations with the photographs of the same events made in the same period by Mario Cresci (b. 1942), an experimental photographer known for his research on abstract composition. That contrast, between institutional and artistic representation, informed the kind of critical analysis to which CSAC is committed. The archive has been used by historians from Italy and abroad for volumes on different periods of Italian history.

MJ: To conclude, could you give us some practical information on any access and/or right restrictions, on the possibility to obtain copies?

CC: Although the copyright of the photographs in our Sezione Fotografia are generally with the authors and their heirs, CSAC has acquired the copyright for the items in the Publifoto Collection, except for photos of specific industrial patents. We have digitized part of the collection so that scholars can consult them remotely. It is also possible to schedule an appointment to inspect the original prints – not the negatives, I am afraid. Relevant information on how to obtain copies of the materials is available from our website.⁶



Figure 3: Publifoto Roma, Gino Prato and Joe Di Maggio in via Veneto with US Ambassador Claire Boothe Luce (reportage for USIS),⁷ Rome, 22 September 1955. Photographic negative, silver bromide gelatine. 60 × 60mm acetate film. CSAC Università di Parma – Archivio Publifoto Roma. © CSAC Università di Parma.



Figure 4: Publifoto Roma, Marisa Allasio e Renato Salvatori, leading actors in Dino Risi's *Poveri ma belli* (1957), next to the coliseum (reportage commissioned by Coca-Cola), 16 September 1958. b/w photographic print, silver bromide gelatine. 240 × 180 mm paper. CSAC Università di Parma – Archivio Publifoto Roma. © CSAC Università di Parma.

To contribute to this column, please contact its curator, Giorgio Bertellini (giorgiob@umich.edu). For details, see "Two new columns: "Translations" and "Archival Notes", in *JICMS* 8:1, 2020, pp. 3–4.

REFERENCE

Cavatorta, Claudia (2020), 'Agenzia Publifoto Roma: Giornalismo locale di una Capitale', in M. Jansen, I. Lanslots and M. Spunta (eds), *Viaggi minimi e luoghi qualsiasi: In cammino tra cinema, letteratura e arti visive nell'Italia contemporanea*, Florence: Franco Cesati editore, pp. 111–18.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Jansen, Monica (2021), 'The Publifoto Agency Collection (CSAC, Parma): Interview with Claudia Cavatorta, curator of the photographic section, Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione (CSAC), University of Parma', *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies*, 9:2, pp. 277–284, doi: https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms_00067_7

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Monica Jansen is assistant professor in Italian literature at the Department of Languages, Literature and Communication at Utrecht University. Her research interests include modernism and postmodernism studies, and more specifically new forms of cultural engagement. She investigates cultural representations of socially relevant topics such as religion, precarity, youth and migration, from an interdisciplinary, transmedial and transnational perspective. She is the co-editor (with Inge Lanslots and Marina Spunta) of the volume *Viaggi minimi e luoghi qualsiasi. In cammino tra cinema, letteratura e arti visive nell'Italia contemporanea* (Franco Cesati Editore, 2020).

Contact: Department of Languages, Literature and Communication, Utrecht University, Trans 10, 3512 JK Utrecht, The Netherlands.

E-mail: m.m.jansen@uu.nl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7649-5295>

Monica Jansen has asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
