

## Uncanny Exposures

### Mobility, Repetition and Desire in Front of a Camera

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A photograph shows a young woman sitting behind a table and leafing through the pages of a (family) photographic album; she poses in a dream-like state, her eyes looking at an unidentified point in front of her. The subject looks (or, better, she *acts* as if she is looking) at pictures of the past (see Image 1). The photograph was taken in a photographic studio in Bassano del Grappa (Italy) in 1939. On the back of the picture we find the message ‘Tanti cordiali saluti da chi sempre ti ricorda. Tua sorella Rita.’<sup>1</sup> Like other photographs, this is an object whose primary affect is to trigger memories, emotions and desire.

Another detail, however, needs to be added. This is a photograph sent from Italy to a relative in Australia. It is an object with the capacity to connect two lives and two geographically distant places. Not only does it belong to another time but also another space. Looking at this picture, the receiver abroad will see a world where she or he is not anymore, and from the place of the Other.

This is one of the numerous photographic portraits that often circulated through epistolary exchange between Italian emigrants and their families and acquaintances back in Italy. The exchange of photographs helped maintain kinship



Image 1: Rita Guadagnini, Bassano Grappa, 1939

Source: ML MSS 5288, add-on 2007, State Library of New South Wales

ties and the images mostly served as mementoes and icons of remembrance. In the particular picture described above, the stillness typical of the photographic image reflects the geographical stillness of its subject; she is the one left at home who is trying to reach her relative abroad through the photographic image. And one way she reaches her far-away family is through a performance that draws the viewer into emotions and desire. This image is, thus, uncanny in its blurring of fiction and reality, familiar and unfamiliar, self and Other, here and there, past and present. Such a theatrical performance (a photograph of somebody looking at other photographs) works also metaphorically for the doubling, repetition and circulation involved in every photographic act and product.

In this article I discuss some of the uncanny characteristics of photographic portraits by turning its attention to photographs representing Italian migrants in Australia. These are images of mobility through time and space. These photographs also reduced spatial distance, transporting migrants' own desires and unknown faraway lives into the imagination of the viewers at home. The migrant's desire is for

both a new life (as it will be mostly discussed here) and for familiar affects. It is also—in Lacanian terms—a desire *from* the Other: the desire to be the object of the Other’s desire, emotions and gaze.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, I will analyse studio photographic portraits produced in Australia during the initial period of the Italian diaspora from the end of the nineteenth century to the first three decades of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> By drawing mostly from Freud’s definition of the uncanny and Barthes’s reflection on photography, I will look at these photographs as uncanny visual traces—and promoters—of emotions, desire and of a journey to a multi-faced identity. These photographs and the studio where they were constructed are also *transnational* spaces where—within specific social and economic practices—processes of repetition, possession and circulation played a crucial role in the maintenance of relations between Australia and Italy.

#### —UNCANNY MODERNITY

The dramatic new migratory movements—and the generally increasing mobility of people around the globe—that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century occurred together with the circulation of mass-produced images and the success of photography.<sup>4</sup> The power of new means of transport to move people to new places paralleled the camera’s extraordinary capacity to capture people’s visual appearances and to transport them into new contexts. Visual and spatial presentations of the world were transformed and thus perceived as both fascinating and threatening. Mobility through faster steamships and diesel-powered motor vessels (whose journey was also facilitated by more efficient alternative routes to Australia) together with advanced visual recordings of the immigrants could expose the uncanny presence of a disturbing otherness. Such an obscurity or uncertainty caused by progress and technology is at the heart of our sense of time and place, as well as personal and cultural history. As explained by Collins and Jervis, this uncertainty testifies to something estranged and displaced that is persistent within the modern experience and construction of selfhood.<sup>5</sup>

In 1919, Freud published his well-known essay ‘The Uncanny’ in which one of the key reference points was the nineteenth-century story of the ‘The Sandman’ by E.T.A. Hoffmann. The Sandman is a quasi-mythical figure used by adults to persuade children to go to sleep; he would throw ‘handfuls of sand in their eyes so that they

jump out of their heads all bleeding'. Freud relates the experience of the uncanny 'to the idea of being robbed of one's eyes'.<sup>6</sup> This is a fear similar to the spectre of the haunting invention of the camera (and other machines in general) since the development of the daguerreotype in France in 1839. Photography is seen as a threatening prosthesis which replaces our eyes and memory and our ability to see and remember for ourselves. Also, according to Benjamin, photography interposes itself between the viewer and that which is being viewed. The viewer is forced to see through the camera lens (as well as through its final product) in order for the image to be presented in front of his or her eyes.<sup>7</sup> Looking through the lens, as well as looking at a photograph, the viewer sees the world from where she or he is not and from the place of the Other. And despite its quotidian familiarity, this form of disembodied perception maintains a strong sense of uncanniness.

The uncanny—and the sense of uncertainty, ambivalence and improper exposure it implies—thus becomes a 'fundamental, constitutive aspect of our experience of the modern'<sup>8</sup> where, among other things, visual resources play a fundamental role in the recording, transmission and circulation of emotions and desire.

At the end of the nineteenth century, among new modes of presentation and representation of the world, the quick and expensive photographic portraits reached mass-production. They mostly circulated as studio portraits in the format of *cartes-de-visite* (a thin albumen-print paper photograph mounted on paper card), and later as cabinet cards (a larger photograph mounted on cardboard) or postcards.<sup>9</sup> Visible, iconic traces of social relationships, these portraits were collected in albums and exchanged among friends and acquaintances.

The full-length depiction in the *cartes-de-visite* facilitated the introduction of appropriate accessories, drapery and backgrounds. And in order to achieve their pictorial effects, photographers also referred to the repertoire used in eighteenth-century painted portraits: landscape or interior settings, columns, pillars and balustrades, curtains, carved tables and chairs.<sup>10</sup> Mannerism, uniformity of feelings, poses and expressions became institutionalised in these photographic portraits all over the world. In the photographic studio, elements of pose, background and lighting were meant to harmonise with the sitters in order to enhance their serious, calm and dignified expressions. These photographs were meant to be about

personal worth and dignity, qualities that were essential themes in Renaissance portraiture.<sup>11</sup>

The photographic portrait had to express duty and decorum, and needed to avoid any emotion; its function was to permit the viewer to look *at* the subject portrayed, not *into* him or her. Avoidance of any intimacy, too, had to be applied to photographs of family groups. In this way, for the sitters, the photographer's studio became 'a place of ritual transcendence and self-contemplation'.<sup>12</sup>

The millions of images produced from the 1860s up to the 1880s disseminated particular canons of aesthetic value, moral judgment, taste and distinction that characterised images of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. In so doing, the developing photographic-portrait market helped to shape feelings of community or sameness among upper- and middle-class subjects all around the world.<sup>13</sup>

The *cartes* circulated among the bourgeoisie as a form of symbolic capital or social currency. The image captured and immortalised through the lens—and circulated through society—would remain as a permanent testimony of the subject's moral and material achievements. In this way, the photo portrait was both a form of commodity and representation. As a form of what Benedict Anderson called 'print capitalism'<sup>14</sup> these images—a mass-produced and interchangeable commodity—contributed to the shaping of specific forms of self-imagining, personal aesthetics and elements of style that would characterise bourgeoisies and bourgeois cultures in different parts of the globe.

By the end of the nineteenth century, photographic portraiture reached its peak in popularity and thanks to radical changes in format and cost it became more accessible even among the lower classes. The standardised and repeated poses and settings used by the photographer for his bourgeois client started being adopted by people from less privileged socio-economic groups, from rural dwellers to factory workers. And in many countries around the world, a remarkable number of these new sitters had just arrived from Italy in search of a new life.

#### —MOVING AND FRAMING

The years between 1896 and 1913 were a period during which Italian emigration reached a high point and when Italy started its transformation from an agricultural to an industrial economy. Yet, this relatively rapid development could not keep pace

with the growing population and the widening gap between the north and the south of the country. The new nation promised in 1860 failed to materialise. Emigration and colonisation, therefore, began to be seen as crucial elements in shaping the face of the newly formed Kingdom.<sup>15</sup> As discussed by Mark Choate, at the turn of the century, the image of an expatriate network of 'Italians Abroad'—made up of emigrants, exiles, expatriates to the colonies and unredeemed territories—was promoted by the Italian state in order to spread the idea of a 'Greater Italy' uniting all members of the Italian nation, at home and abroad.<sup>16</sup>

Mass migration supplied labour where capital needed workers, thus having profound effects on the evolving global economy of the time. Between 1815 and 1939, more than fifty million people departed from Europe to non-European destinations, among them Australia.<sup>17</sup> Approximately fourteen million Italians emigrated between 1871 and 1914, and about twenty-three million left their country in the hundred years since unification in 1860. In the 1880s, the worldwide agricultural crisis struck Italy, and its people—similarly to those of Ireland, Poland and Jewish-settled territories—became part of the capitalist world's labour force. In 1896, with the end of the international depression, Italy started entering the ranks of the world's wealthiest industrial nations, and emigrants constituted an amazing resource for the growing Kingdom of Italy. Transcontinental railroads and steamships facilitated and speeded long-distance migration and also made seasonal cross-Atlantic moves possible. Migration was a move between economic stages of development. Unskilled, mostly male Italian rural workers moved within Europe and overseas in order to work in construction, mining, industry or in plantations, or even in search of cheap land in fertile plains.<sup>18</sup> In Australia, Italian migrants started working in railways and as miners, wood-cutters and sugarcane farmers.<sup>19</sup> Italian migrants provided labour to the emerging capitalist countries when industrialisation was transforming the old social order; in exchange, they received remittances that were sent back to their homeland and which so dramatically contributed to the solidification of Italy's historic economic boom. Moreover, many potential emigrants who could not afford the costs of leaving Italy were aided by previous emigrants currently resident in the receiving countries, for instance, through remittances, prepaid tickets, accommodation and subsistence upon arrival in the new land.

The migrant, however, entered the host societies at the bottom of the social hierarchy and his or her presence was frequently considered a disturbance. Since the first arrivals of Italian emigrants in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, anti-Italian sentiments, as well as uprisings, occurred on various occasions. Labour Party and trade unions were against newly arrived Italians competing for work in the goldfields of Western Australia or invading sugar cane plantations in Queensland. Stereotypes spread and easily instilled fears of high murder rates and secret societies. The constant inflow of ‘Mediterranean scum’<sup>20</sup> was perceived as threatening Australian racial purity and social harmony; Southern Europeans were often seen as a separate race and inferior to the British. For instance, in 1897 the Western Australian Parliament was warned that, along with Greeks and Hungarians, Italians ‘had become a greater pest in the United States than the coloured races’.<sup>21</sup> As in other countries, their arrivals and miserable living conditions were often documented, recorded, controlled, romantically or piteously conveyed as well as satirised through visual images, such as sketches, drawings and photographs in magazines and newspapers. Photographic portraits too—taken, for instance, by criminologists and anthropologists—became the format of photographic documents, official projects and social surveys in which, according to John Tagg, ‘the code of social inferiority framed the meaning of representations of the objects of supervision or reform’.<sup>22</sup> These images enabled forms of surveillance and disciplinary power through the way the migrants—in detention and deportation processing stations, police cells, prisons, homes, schools and at work, for instance—were presented, arranged for the camera and offered to the viewer as a threatening and disturbing Other.<sup>23</sup>

These, however, were not the only visual images of migrants that circulated at that time. Migrants managed to react to such a representation through a construction, reproduction and circulation of other images where subjectivity could be expressed. And this happened also in the photographic studio.

#### —PRESENCES AND ABSENCES

In contrast to the uses of photography imposed on them from without—as mentioned earlier—Italian migrants construed the photographer’s studio as a place where they could assert control over their own visibility and its fabrication. Both the

photographer's studio and the photographic image provided spaces where such a construction could be situated against the effects of marginalisation and displacement.<sup>24</sup>

According to Abdelmalek Sayad, the immigrant discovers the 'individuation' of his or her body as it is a 'body that is socially and *aesthetically* designated as a foreign body'.<sup>25</sup> One strategy to oppose structures of domination, power and surveillance is, therefore, to oppose the others' scrutinising gaze to allow the possibility of agency. In many of his writings, Michel Foucault describes domination in terms of 'relations of power' and excludes the assumption that 'power is a system of domination which controls everything and which leaves no room for freedom'. For Foucault, instead, where power is found, 'the possibility of resistance' will also be found.<sup>26</sup> And resistance can also be accomplished by repositioning the gaze. One way the migrant undertakes it is by constructing a specific visual image of him or herself in order to assert agency and subjectivity.

Italian migrants turned to mechanical reproduction in order to endure a social, spatial and temporal displacement. Posing in the photographic studio, staring at the camera and choosing to fix an idealised image of themselves in time and space, migrant subjects could reinforce their presence within the host society, while situating their bodies and desire in opposition to dominating strategies of control and representation. The migrants entered this complex mechanism in the attempt to reconstruct a personal identity and a new life for themselves and for their families left behind in Italy.

Through these black and white or sepia-toned pictures, the migrant could overcome his or her absence–presence dilemma. In his *La Double Absence*, Sayad explains how 'the absence of the emigrant and the presence of the immigrant' are both correlative and dependent.<sup>27</sup> The migrant is simultaneously present and absent in both native and host society. The body, therefore, becomes the migrant's referent and the only certainty to the sufferance of his or her temporal and spatial dislocation. The migrant lives in the space and time of the memory of home and in the present reality of the new country. Through the photograph, Italian migrants could fill their physical absence in Italy. Sent together with letters, or just as a postcard, the photograph—as both image and object—would bring the migrant, and his or her nostalgia and emotions, back home.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, photographs



reinforce the presence and visibility of the migrants' bodies in the host society. And what was invisible of the migrant (dignity, decorum and aspiration) as a component of an anonymous, troubling mass, was then made visible and presentable in the photographic portrait. Via photography, the migrant becomes maker and spectator of his or her own image or Other; this image is also simultaneously a trace of a past moment and of desire.

The presence-absence of the migrant mirrors, however, his or her uncanny presence-absence as subject of the photograph, as explained by Barthes. In the photographic portrait, the migrant's body is frozen in a death-like pose. By deciding to be photographed, the migrant participates in his or her transformation into an Other and an object. Freud maintains that the sensation of uncanniness is experienced especially in relation to death and dead bodies 'when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not'.<sup>29</sup> Barthes argues that the essence of every photograph is the return of the dead; the photographs show us a reality in a past state and simultaneously it attests that what we see *has been* real. At the same time, every photograph paradoxically moves the reality of the object to the past: what we see in the picture *has been there*. To be photographed is, thus, to be rendered dead: 'Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe'.<sup>30</sup> The studio photograph magically doubles this effect through a performance that enacts an uncanny return of the migrant both from the past and from the foreign, distant land. It is, however, the return of the familiar in an unfamiliar form. The photograph and the photographic studio make the migrant sitter-subject complicit in his or her own estrangement from him or herself and in the creation of a 'disembodied image'. In fact, according to Barthes:

I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image ... I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing ... For the photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.<sup>31</sup>

The photograph is also a trace that functions as an indexical sign. In this way, Barthes tends to locate the photograph's uncanniness in its insistence on the absent referent, in its indexical quality. What we see in a photograph is not simply a copy of its referent, 'but an emanation of past reality' that pursues its own career

independently of its original. In photography, this process is repeated mechanically and reproduced to infinity.

Exposure can therefore cause disembodiment and estrangement. Yet this effect is central to transnational lives. Photography creates a liminal space in between life and death, presence and absence, Self and Other, here and there, where desire and the migrant's (constructed) identity repeatedly emerge against repression and control as well as immobility.

The repetitive quality of the photograph and its persistent presentation of the past in the present also occurs in another manner. In the photographer's studio, poses, backgrounds, facial expressions, decorative furniture and objects used very often replicated the settings and atmospheres already adopted in middle-class portraiture. These, in turn, emulated earlier aesthetic canons. Therefore, the portraits fabricated in the photographic studio offered migrants the possibility to exchange money for a beautified and idealised 'reality' which duplicated past representations. In this way, through mobility and labour abroad, the Italians integrated into transnational processes of production, accumulation and circulation of capital, goods and images. And photographic representation and money collaborated in the repetition and exchange of both a performance and a desire.

—IMPRESSIONS OF AN IMAGINARY UNITY

In the photographer's studio, the Italian migrants appeared as they wanted to be seen. Light, poses and background were carefully orchestrated to capture and frame the migrant's desired objects: social ascension, respect as well as affection. The setting is arranged so that it recreates an imaginary interior environment with panel backdrops, chairs, columns, plants, stairs and windows.<sup>32</sup> On such a suitable stage the sitter could perform alone, with his family or friends in Australia, his or her ideal. This is clear, for instance, in Images 2 and 3, where the subjects are framed between reality and an imaginary space; the photograph prolongs their idealised self and grants 'status' by fixing the subjects in time. In these images, the sitters are dressed as for a special occasion, they look good and want to make an impression on those who will see their photograph. In Image 3, the sitters assume bourgeois poses and severe facial expressions to communicate status. This portrait crystallises a manner subjects adopted in the public performance of a role. The domestic



Image 2: Panucci family members. Sydney, early 1930s  
Reproduced with kind permission of Frank Panucci.



Image 3: Carmela and Antonino Macinante, Sydney, c.1920  
Source: ML MSS 5288, add-on 1967, State Library of New South Wales

background also frames their formality in the attempt to convey social and economic accomplishment.

This picture is also a family portrait with the function of displaying and visually reinforcing a relationship to the Other in Italy.<sup>33</sup> Supervised by the photographer, these migrants learnt to see themselves as 'an image' and to see themselves in the eyes of others.<sup>34</sup> As Graham Clarke points out, the portrait offers the 'promise of the individual through a system of representation which at once hides and distorts the subject before the lens'. The portrait's meaning exists, therefore, within wider codes of significance (for example, space, posture and dress) that have, in turn, already framed and fixed the individual. In this way, the photographic portrait 'reflects the terms by which the culture itself confers status and meaning on the subject, while the subject as image floats problematically between exterior and interior identities'.<sup>35</sup> In other photographs, by contrast, the sitters pose with a slight smile as if expressing optimism or achievement; some portraits, for instance, were made to celebrate a promotion, a new job or a successful business.

In some of these portraits, facial expressions are contrived and poses are rigid; they reveal the subject's humble background and his or her unease with the camera, as in Image 2 or the woman in Image 3. The subject's uneasiness and emotional reaction in front of the camera almost disrupts the performance. Often other marks that were meant to be concealed appear and disturb the intended codes to visual representation. In some of these pictures, humble outfits, worn shoes and cracked hands easily come into view. Signs of humbleness and sorrow are keys to the contradictoriness and theatricality of these portraits. They point to the reality behind the performance. At the same time, similarly to Barthes' *punctum*, they fix and disturb our gaze; these signs pierce, 'prick' or 'bruise' the viewer with a part of the image that translates it as a whole. These marks move the viewer's gaze beyond the theatrical paraphernalia of the given-to-be-seen toward what lies behind. They often seem outside the photographer's control and consequently trigger a further emotional response from the viewer. The confected, canonical performance (that is, the lack of emotions requested in past bourgeois photographic portraits) is disturbed and, as stated by Žižek, we assist with: 'the alteration of a small detail in a well-known picture that all of a sudden renders the whole picture strange and uncanny', yet real.<sup>36</sup> The unfamiliar is so familiar that the two almost coincide. It is in

such a detail, we can argue, that the migrant's desire expressed by the picture emerges powerfully. Although these signs disturb the social fabrication of the image, they reinforce both its aspirational intention and the singularity and sensibility of the subject. Rather than just an 'accident', as with Barthes' *punctum*, they are historical and real traces of the individual's identity and subjectivity that are hard to veil.

Photography was made compliant to the fabrication of an illusion which on other occasions could be more dramatic. Sometimes posing in the studio while driving real or cardboard cars or posing with bicycles was, for instance, quite popular, as in Image 4. Almost a metaphor for social mobility and advancement, these photographs shifted the attention from an internal environment to a fictitious outside space. Often these images were just intentionally humoristic attempts to enliven a dull reality through fiction, and they were not essentially fabricated to mislead those left at home.



Image 4: Giuseppe Torlai from Lucca and friends

Source: Fondazione Paolo Cresci, Lucca

The representational code behind this particular genre of studio photography was widely known also in Australia.<sup>37</sup> On other occasions, migrants posed with objects they really owned as proof of economic success. The use of studio props, however, could also serve the purpose of deliberate fabulation; in these cases, the fictitious overstatement went beyond the representational conventions that sitters and beholders shared in common.

These photographs were clear cases of theatrical impression management, the visual complement to the inflated accounts in many of the immigrants' letters. They were a private answer to the sombre—and very often miserable—reality of the immigrant's life.<sup>38</sup>

Whether the sitters had actually reached the aspired social status in the new country or they were just faking it, these migrants objectified and materialised themselves through the production and dissemination of their body as a public symbol according to pre-existing social and economic discourses.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, within transnational movements of things, capital and people, the Italian migrants became part of a culture in which the public presentation of the self—and the creation of identity that it implies—was achieved through both visual fabrication, circulation and desire.

It is interesting to note that, in these photographs, specific collective or ethnographic identities, as well as details showing Italianness, are presented only sporadically. One example can be seen in Image 5, where members of a family residing in Sydney pose in Italian costume and military outfit for a fundraising occasion during World War I.

Charitable collections for wars and natural disasters (for instance, the Messina-Calabria earthquake of 1908, the Naples cholera epidemic of 1911 and the Lybian War of 1911–1912) provided Italian emigrants with the opportunity to demonstrate their affection for and loyalty to their country of origin, and so to support it in periods of trouble.

In Image 5, the sitters intended to show their desire for active participation in Italy's national discourse.<sup>40</sup> It can be argued, however, that—like the other studio photographs discussed here—this is a visual fabrication, existing only in the temporal and spatial dimension of the photograph, in its artificial setting, use of



Image 5: Macinante family members, Sydney, 1917

Source: ML MSS 5288, add-on 1967, State Library of New South Wales

costumes and stiff, arranged poses. Photographs of Italian migrants produced in Australia mirror both the alterity already existing within the adoptive country and in the country of origin: a double otherness. It can be argued that, with this particular case, the photograph (and its performance) returns more markedly the *otherness* of the Italian emigrant, his/her being outside the boundaries of the Italian nation. It provides, consequently, a visual presentation of the imaginary (and imagined) unity of the Greater Italy wished by Liberal and later Fascist governments.

This photograph, like the others (and the studios) discussed above, should be, rather, perceived as a kind of third space, an in-between location, where migrants could define an idealised status in the middle of a process of identity shaping. Just like the 'high-street' photo-portraits of Afro-Caribbean migrants in postwar Britain analysed by Stuart Hall, this sort of portrait and subject exist only in and for the photographic studio time and space.<sup>41</sup> In the confined space of both the photographer's studio and the photograph, the models seemed to live inside rather than outside the moment.

Furthermore, these images contributed to creating a shared discourse of the way the Italian migrants wanted to be seen and imagined, particularly in their native countries. At the moment these pictures were received, the whole community of immigrants could be envisaged as represented by association in one image by people at home. More specifically, through global practices of visibility and circulation, photography democratised both accessibility to and availability of a collective identity. At the same time, these photographs functioned as sites through which narratives of collective belonging (and exclusion) were fabricated. Through the rituals of photographic self-representation (and viewing), and by using and repeating similar poses and props, migrants could construct notions of themselves as an 'imagined community' rooted in fantasy. Photography—along with print technology as discussed by Anderson—contributed to the creation of a shared sense of fraternity, power and time. For Anderson, the newspaper was crucial in constructing a sense of national belonging and a sense of community (in anonymity) where none existed. The photograph, on the other hand, evokes the ghost of past belonging, intimacy and community where none exists any longer. At the same time, it generates a new sense of a globalised community as transnational belonging. And it begins to do so in the crucial moment when Italy was inventing itself as a nation. The imaginary ideas of unity that migrants carry lie precisely in this visual and virtual nation building that they perform through personal desire, exchange and family relationships.

Nevertheless, the portrait made in the host country was an expression of its subject's conscious will to be seen and remembered in a specific way by present and future generations. As stated by Susan Sontag, 'after the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality (and importance) it



would never otherwise have enjoyed'.<sup>42</sup> The migrant will return to his or her status, but his or her image will outlast its viewer. In this way, the subject's aims are positioned according to what the Other (the photographer, family, friends as well as institutions at home) wants to see. The Other will view the subject as the object of his or her own desire.<sup>43</sup>

Family and friends at home received the photo by post; they avidly scrutinised every part of it, as if that unique moment fixed on paper could reveal to them every single detail of 'real' life in the foreign country. For the people at home, whether an image of a potential condition or of an actual achievement, the portrait became the promise to exchange the representation for the real experience, the copy for the original. It could also offer encouragement to expatriate.

However, for the viewer at home, the object is never fully captured, as in the photograph it never becomes present; on the contrary, it is frozen and framed in time and space.<sup>44</sup> Photography itself is a metaphor for desire, where desire is always in a state of becoming and where the object of desire is never quite captured: 'Photography manifests a similar failure in that the object captured in time and space never becomes present, it is always in the past but it preserves time as snapshot of memory.'<sup>45</sup>

As already stated, the photograph registers a corporal trace, an index, while at the same time it fixes such an image in a temporal and spatial dimension. The time, in particular, is the past of the photograph; any time the portrait is looked at by the subject him or herself or by his or her family, it refers to a public moment that 'has been', to an uncanny presence-absence, and to both a physical and a visual journey to another idealised identity.

#### —CONCLUSION

The studio photographic portrait was both in itself and along transnational space constructed and inhabited by the Italian migrant. It was a platform that offered Italians abroad a space and a time to construct and display their suitability to the host country, to probe, consolidate or idealise a status and perform a modern subjectivity. At the same time, it allowed them to maintain an emotional relationship with their country of origin. The photograph was a stage on which migrants could enact publicly an imaginary transition to another identity whose uncanny

(re)presentation, in between presence and absence, Self and Other, here and there, would survive for ever.

Yet, photography is still—according to Gilles Deleuze’s definition—a social machine, an ‘assemblage’ of technical procedures, signifying effects and economic functions.<sup>46</sup> And the photographic portrait, in particular, maintains its function as a sign that both describes individuals and inscribes their social identity.<sup>47</sup> Description and inscription are based on established conventions; subjectivity, in fact, is produced through signifiers, languages and modes pre-existing the individual.

Late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century photographic portraits of Italian migrants in Australia responded to precise contemporary economic, cultural and social changes. They were based on standardised forms of self-imagining and personal aesthetics which had characterised nineteenth-century bourgeois culture in different parts of the globe. By translating the migrant’s aspirations and mobility into a visual artefact, the photograph played a fundamental role in the ideological construction of the migrant’s new desired social and economic identity. Poses, dresses and objects reflected an intricate game of meaning in which exterior appearance framed and fixed a fabricated, public self. The subject being photographed and the viewer (as well as the photographer) thus collaborated in a performative process driven by desire.

At the same time, these photographs, like migrants, moved from one part of the world to another. Their social lives, cultural and historical power was (and is) repeatedly maintained by their presence in space and geographical mobility. Like other photographs, these portraits travel through time. As images, they present us with the past, present and future of their subjects and, as objects, they are seen and consumed repetitively throughout the years. For its spatial and temporal mobility, the photographic portrait is a powerful means by which social and economic processes of accumulation, possession and circulation play a crucial role in the maintenance of transnational—as well as family—relations.

The migrant’s portrait would start its life in Australia and end up in his or her country of origin. Possibly included in a family photographic album, it would definitely be seen, scrutinised, narrated and commented on various occasions (as well as reframed and duplicated, like the photographs in the album in Image 1) and throughout the years. In this way, the migrant’s desire is accomplished: he or she is

remembered and his or her image would trigger emotions. The migrant would also join his/her family in the form s/he wanted: victorious and successful. The camera and the photographic studio become what Žižek has defined as ‘an ontological guarantee’ of the subject’s being, because ‘I exist only insofar I am looked at all the time’.<sup>48</sup> Studio portraits of Italian migrants and of their families taken in Australia therefore acquired more than an affective and self-aspirational significance. They were also a resource which could guarantee the subject’s presence through their visual image and the uncanny perceptions and emotions this would generate throughout time, generations and places.

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—NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This photograph is held with papers and other photographs from 1925–1966 in one of the folders belonging to the Guadagnini family. These documents, as well as images 3 and 5 in this article, are part of the Italian migrants manuscript collection preserved in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. See also James Andrighetti, *Mitchell Library Manuscript Guides, no. 17. Italians in New South Wales*, State Library of NSW, Sydney, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> According to Lacan, desire is generated by the norms and values of the culture in which we live. It can never be fully satisfied and repeatedly pushes the subject onto new objects and Others. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Norton, New York, 1977, pp. 292–325. With regard to emotions

and desire, I follow Ben-Ze'ev's definition of desire as 'motivational component of a complex emotional state ... Emotions include such a component' although 'a *desire* in itself is not an emotion'. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *The Subtlety of Emotions*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000, p. 75. With reference to desire and photography, I am also indebted to Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire*, MacMillan, Melbourne, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> For some reflections on Italian migration and photography, see Dino Gentile and Peppino Ortoleva, 'Album di gruppo', in *Sapere la strada. Percorsi e mestieri dei biellesi nel mondo*, ed. Peppino Ortoleva, Electa, Milan, 1986, pp. 35–48. Antonio Gibelli, '«Fatemi unpo Sapere ... » Scrittura e fotografia nella corrispondenza degli emigranti liguri', in *La via delle Americhe. L'emigrazione ligure tra evento e racconto*, ed. Luca Borzani and Antonio Gibelli, Sagep, Genoa, 1989, pp. 87–94. See also Paola Corti, *Emigranti e immigrati nelle rappresentazioni di fotografi e fotogiornalisti*, Editoriale Umbra, Foligno, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> With reference to travel photography, Peter D. Osborne explains how throughout the nineteenth century, photography acquired the function of 'unifying the geographical, economic and, indeed, imaginary territory across which capitalism was being extended'. In the complex relationship between mobility, the global distribution of images and the circulation of money, nineteenth-century capitalist culture was produced. Peter D. Osborne, *Travelling Light: Photography, Travel and Visual Culture*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000, pp. 11–12.

<sup>5</sup> Jo Collins and John Jervis, 'Introduction', in *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, eds Jo Collins and John Pervis, Palgrave, London, 2008, pp. 1–9.

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 14, Art and Literature*, ed. Albert Dickson, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1990, pp. 336–76.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Vol.4, 1938-1940*, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Harvard, MA, 2003, pp. 251–83.

<sup>8</sup> Collins and Jervis, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> The *cartes-de-visite* or *portrait-cards* was patented in 1854 by the French photographer, André Adolphe Eugène Disderi. France, Britain and America were the countries mostly responsible for the dissemination of photography. British and French travellers had a crucial role in making photography popular also in Asia, Africa and the Antipodes, while the Americans took photography to South America and the Pacific. See Alma Davenport, *The History of Photography: an Overview*, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1999. For photography in Australia, consider Alan Davies, *An Eye for Photography: The Camera in Australia*, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne, 2005; Warwick Reeder, 'The Stereograph and the Album Portrait in Colonial Sydney 1859–62', *History of Photography* vol. 23, no. 2, 1999, pp. 181–91. For a history of studio portrait photograph, see Heinz K. Henisch and Bridget A. Henisch, *The Photographic Experience 1839–1914: Images and Attitudes*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1994, pp. 11–54.

- <sup>10</sup> Audrey Linkman, *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, Tauris Parke Books, London, 1993, p. 52.
- <sup>11</sup> Linkman, p. 46; Robin Wichard and Carol, *Victorian Cartes-de-Visite*, Shire Publications, Buckinghamshire, pp. 21–33.
- <sup>12</sup> Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997, pp. 107–110; See also André Rouillé, *L'Empire de la photographie: Photographie et pouvoir bourgeois, 1839–1870*, Le Sycomore, Paris, 1982 and Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997.
- <sup>13</sup> Poole, p. 112.
- <sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York, 1991, p. 36.
- <sup>15</sup> Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, 'Introduction', in *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, eds Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p. 8.
- <sup>16</sup> Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2008.
- <sup>17</sup> See Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffrey G. Williamson (eds), *The Age of Mass Migration: Causes and Economic Impact*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 95–122; Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002, pp. 331–66; Samuel L. Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870 to 1914*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1999.
- <sup>18</sup> Hoerder, pp. 332–3.
- <sup>19</sup> See also Baily. For numbers and destinations of the Italian diaspora, see Gianfausto Rosoli (ed.), *Un secolo di emigrazione italiana 1876–1976*, Centro Studi Emigrazione, Rome, 1978.
- <sup>20</sup> As reported by the *Smith's Weekly* in 1926. Quoted in Gianfranco Cresciani, *Italians in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 57.
- <sup>21</sup> Western Australian Parliament, *Parliamentary Debates, Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly*, Volume 9, Governmental Printer, 1897, p. 518. See also Desmond O'Connor, *No Need to Be Afraid: Italian Settlers in South Australia Between 1839 and the Second World War*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1996; Patrick Bertola, 'Italian Migration to Western Australia before WWI: Some Observations on Ethnicity and Conflict', in *Italian Historical Society Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, Dec. 1993, pp. 5–10; Adriano Boncompagni, 'From the Apennines to the Bush: "Temporary" Migrants from Tuscany and the Western Australia's "Italophobia", 1921–1939', *Altreitalia*, no. 19, *gennaio-dicembre* 1999, <[www.altreitalia.it/ImagePub.aspx?id=78362](http://www.altreitalia.it/ImagePub.aspx?id=78362)>. For an overview of Italians in Australia at the end of the nineteenth century see Cresciani, *Italians in Australia*.
- <sup>22</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, MacMillan, London, 1988, p. 37.
- <sup>23</sup> A number of photographs of Italian sugar cane cutters in Australia can be found in collections held by the Italian Historical Society, Melbourne. Consider also the numerous photographs of Italian prisoners

of World War I and World War II held at the National Archives of Australia. It can be discussed how, for the Australians, these photographs could be perceived as a resource through which the uncanny presence of a disturbing otherness was revealed. This present paper, however, intends to explore the uncanny feeling suggested by the photograph to the viewer in the country of origin and, above all, to the viewer looking at these images today.

<sup>24</sup> Eric Homberger, 'Immigration: Saying the Unsayable', *History in Focus*, vol. 11, <<http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Migration/articles/homberger.html#22>>

<sup>25</sup> Abdelamlek Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 204.

<sup>26</sup> Raul Fornet-Betancourt et al., 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview with Michel Foucault on January 20, 1984', trans. J.D. Gauthier, in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 12, no. 2-3, Summer 1987, p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> Sayad, p. 124.

<sup>28</sup> On how the materiality of the photograph is integral to its function and use, see Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (eds), *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, Routledge, London, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Freud, p. 354.

<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Cape, London, 1982, p. 96.

<sup>31</sup> Barthes, pp. 10-11.

<sup>32</sup> Coincidentally, images 3 and 5 have the same backdrop. This reinforces the repetitiveness of the studio photograph.

<sup>33</sup> There is not enough room here to expand on the issue of photographs of family groups and migration. For one recent study on this topic, see Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2012. Campt discusses the affective and enunciative function of family photographs for black communities in diaspora.

<sup>34</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1990, p. 29. See also Max Kozloff, *The Theatre of the Face: Portrait Photography Since 1900*, Phaidon, London, 2007, p. 168.

<sup>35</sup> Graham Clarke, 'Introduction', in Graham Clarke (ed.), *The Portrait in Photography*, Reaktion Books, London, 1992, pp. 1-5; and 'Public Faces', pp. 72-4.

<sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1992 p. 53.

<sup>37</sup> On the use of props and backdrops in studio photographs at the end of the nineteenth century, see Hensch and Hensch, pp. 11-54.

<sup>38</sup> Rob Kroes, *Them and Us: Questions of Citizenship in a Globalizing World*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2000, pp. 46-55; and for further reflection on photographs and migration,

*Photographic Memories: Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History*, Dartmouth College Press, Lebanon, NH, 2007, pp. 34–53.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion on photography and the display of the body, see Suren Lalvani, 'Photography, Epistemology and the Body', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1993, pp. 439–64.

<sup>40</sup> Choate, pp. 189–217.

<sup>41</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Reconstruction Work: Images of Post-war Black Settlement', in *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, eds Jo Spence and Patricia Holland, Virago, London, 1991, pp. 152–64.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar, New York, 1977, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Including the desire of the Liberal (and later Fascist) Italian Government for a Greater Italy and an imperialist agenda. See Choate.

<sup>44</sup> Marsh, p. 263.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>46</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988, p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> Tagg, p. 37; Poole, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Big Brother, or, the Triumph of the Gaze over the Eye', in *Ctrl [Space]. Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, eds Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne and Peter Weibel, MIT, Cambridge, MA, 2001, pp. 224–7.