An Example of Cataloguing Industrial Photos by Subject: The Edison Fond
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Introduction

The considerations in this article were presented during the seminar *Descrivere un'immagine: la soggettazione della fotografia* (Describing an Image: Cataloguing Photography by Subject) when the Centro per la Cultura d'Impresa gave an account of the reordering and cataloguing project of one part of the Edison Fond using the Sirbec IT program (created by the Regione Lombardia and distributed without charge upon request).

In this article, I will explain the method used in the F disk to compile the fields Sgti and Sgtd, meaning the "identification" of the subjects photographed and the "subject identification". Although each field is to be compiled according to the instructions of the Central for Catalogue and Documentation Institute. There is plenty of margin for personal interpretation with respect to the genre of pictures in a specific archives.

Along with the description of some examples of this type of cataloguing, I believe it is necessary to point out some underlying assumptions.

First Assumption

The producer of this archives is a company, and companies – especially those with longstanding origins as in Edison's case – are likely to have gone through several corporate transformations.

The records we have are the result of the 1996 merger between Edison, an electric company set up in 1881, and Montecatini, a chemical company set up in 1888. The outcome of that union was Montecatini Edison (better known by its shortened name Montedison), which in 1991, would subsequently be called Edison.

Therefore, it is obvious that when studying the photographic archives of the company, photos dated before 1966 of a mine, a laboratory, or Moplen products; of Nobel Prize winner Giulio Natta or the "Carosello" sketches with Gino Bramieri, come from the historical records of Montecatini; while a picture of an electric plant or of the set of a film by Ermanno Olmi was produced by Edison. Following the merger, any photo, whether of a lab or an electric plant, was commissioned by the same producer.

Second Assumption

Edison has always been a large company with its own photographic office which, in the 1970s, sorted and reorganized the entire photographic patrimony in single-theme albums. Each album is dedicated to the carefully considered diachronic description of each center of production; therefore, not only a mine or an electric plant, but also its surrounding social "district" (nursery schools, workers' town, infrastructures and transportation).

The existence of this archival connection among the pictures allowed the retrieval and cataloguing by subject of each image through its link to a particular schedule. Therefore, at the first stage of cataloguing, it is easy to identify the places where each picture had been taken. Given these conditions, we felt that a reference of the archival hierarchy of the information (also in the online version of Sirbec) would be invaluable.

Third Assumption

Cataloguing requires specific knowledge for all types of archives; however the cataloguing of technical-scientific archives requires professional consultation (a long and expensive process) utilizing instruments that are not always present in the archives.

While cataloguing the Edison Fond's photographs, the team was able to make use of a valuable existing support: many catalogued albums already include the index of the images. For example, the cataloguing of an image like this one was able to benefit from the indications in the list of the images of the corresponding folder.

It was noticeable that, for each photo in the list, the subject of the picture was mentioned so precisely that we were able to catalogue the images with detailed analytic and hierarchic information to the point that that they could be used by both experts and non-experts alike.

The labels stuck on the back of the supports, usually with technical and specific information, were another helpful instrument to catalogue the images. This one is the back of the image whose front is published above as well as the list of the photos included in the corresponding alum.

Fourth Assumption

Photographs contain a great number of details, but not all of them are explicit, which means they can be retrieved only through their cataloguing by subject. In our case, thanks to the above-mentioned elements, the subject listing was accurately guided by the technical knowledge of Edison, leaving contents of lesser interest to the company in the background.

While cataloguing we tried to highlight some data that was not so apparent with a mere "reading" of the image. In this way, we were able to retrieve information about the photo's context, such as the social "district". For example, the picture of a kitchen is catalogued along with the mine where it is located, or a seemingly common landscape is interpreted and catalogued as a picture of a center of production.

Some features of the catalogued pictures

All the data retrieved during the first stage of study and recognition of the fond allowed us to identify a hierarchy of information to describe the pictures according to both the original aim of the photographic service commissioned by the company, and the distinguishing features of the

photographers (among others, Bruno Stefani, Vincenzo Aragozzini and Publifoto). In particular, it was clear how one distinctive feature of the archives is the "static" nature of the images: the pictures preserved up to now, in fact, show mostly the different aspects of the productive activities (images of industrial plants and workers), while records of company life (institutional events, the condition of workers, recreational activities and so on) are absent or less relevant.

The organization of the SGTI fields

a.   Production Plant Photos

The subject string has been structured according to a sequence from general to specific whose elements can be illustrated as follows:

1. Location of photo shoot
2. Classification of the plant as a productive sector (for example: sulfur mine, petrochemical plant, marble quarry, and so on).
   The identification of the place followed by the typology of the production (meaning each stage of the industrial process, from extraction to processing, transport and so on) allowed us to precisely define the company division documented by the picture. The method used to identify these sectors emphasized the object of the industrial activity: mines, for example, were identified according to the mineral extracted (and not on the processing result;, pyrite mines as opposed to iron mines) – as also indicated in the original captions) . In contrast, the plants were described by the main product of the industrial process (i.e. explosive plants, silicate plants or, in the case of complex industrial processing, petrochemical plants, plants for the pyrite processing and so on). While identifying all fields, the analysis of the records linked to the pictures as captions, inscriptions and inventories was fundamental.
   Through the identification of the division, we managed to reconstruct, at least partially, the geography of the "districts" where the company worked: Montecatini, then Montedison, distinguished in the years because of the diversification of its productive divisions, from iron metallurgy to chemistry up to the production of electric Energy, frequently related to precise geographical districts which we tried to highlight in the subject formulation.
3. "Department" of the plant (i.e. for a plant processing nitrogen: nitric acid plant, sulfuric acid plant, methylamines plant, etc).
4. Specific subject of the camera shot: a piece of machinery, a particular stage of production, etc.

b.   Corporate Life Pictures

The hierarchy described above is also suitable, with small adjustments, for cataloguing pictures about aspects of corporate life not strictly linked to production. For example, for the photographic campaigns designed to portray corporate welfare activity (schools, workers' houses, working men's clubs, etc), the subject was described as follows: "Location – Type of welfare activity – Image Specifications".
In contrast, in the case of welfare structures linked to specific places of production, this type of link was highlighted as follows: "Location – Plant – Type of welfare activity – Image Specifications".

c. **Trade Fair Photographs**

Trade fairs were also analyzed and the subject was divided as follows: "Place – Event and date – Pavilion or field – Specifications". The inclusion of the date allowed us to distinguish events with the same name but with different dates.

The Use of Technical Language

The use of the above-mentioned criteria led to the creation of subject strings, uniform in terms of the hierarchy of the information and described by homogeneous words (or groups of words) regarding the different productive sectors depicted in the photos. Nonetheless, the use of technical language from the various industrial procedures made it necessary to add a layperson's explanation of the image. For this reason, the field "subject identification" (Sgtd) proved to be very useful.

An Example of Valorization

The method of cataloguing by subject from general to specific, which allowed us to reconstruct the context of the picture, was also quite useful for the online enhancement of the fond because it enabled us to find the best title in the Sgti to give the user. As secondary information, there is a revised caption, similar to the Sgtd, to recall the most commonly used photo captions.