
GREETINGS FROM GELA. A VISUAL RESEARCH ON INDUSTRIAL IMAGERY AND A LATE-INDUSTRIAL TERRITORY

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ABSTRACT

'Greetings from Gela' explores the Sicilian industrial exploitation and its dark legacy through the dialogue between documentary photographs taken in 2019, and postcards produced in the second half of the twentieth century, when the black-gold dream grew with the glorification of the myths of 'modernity' and 'progress'.

KEYWORDS

Postcards; late-industrialisation; Sicily; visual research; photography; industrial imagery; representation; territory.

BIO

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‘Greetings from Gela’ is a photo-essay extracted from a larger visual research project named ‘Nerosogno’ (Black Dream), carried out in 2019 in some industrialised areas of south-eastern Sicily.¹ Starting in the second half of the twentieth century, the territories have been the subject of accelerated industrialisation processes, mainly linked to the petrochemical sector, making them the most important in Europe, both in terms of extension and production.

United by a prescriptive, hetero-directed and extractivist development model, and based on state intervention and the creation of giant productive poles (Benadusi and Ruggero 2021: 7-8), these areas are now classified as ‘Sites of national interest’ (SIN), due to the high levels of water, air and soil contamination, mainly caused by the release of chemical pollutants and toxic waste from the oil refining process.

In Gela (province of Caltanissetta), the photographic documentation is divided between the sea and the land, the Gulf and the *Piana* (lowland), and joins the postcards produced in a specific period, collectively remembered as the era of maximum splendour of the city: the Sixties of Enrico Mattei, the founder of Eni, the creator and supporter of Gela’s petrochemical centre, built on a large area of about 500 hectares.

These are the years in which an idealised ‘modernity’, accelerated and imposed from above, allowed for rapid urbanisation and the birth of a working-class culture that was transplanted from Northern Italy to the South; it promised employment, material benefits, and new lifestyles; it engulfed every alternative of endogenous development, possibly linked to seaside tourism and archaeology, and temporarily, and ideally, removed the stigmas and hardships of agricultural society. After just over a decade, the initial productive and occupational dynamism underwent a sudden slowdown, while an irreversible labour and environmental crisis advanced.

In 1990 the industrial area was declared ‘a high environmental risk’: while fragmentary ‘green’ reconversion processes were being sketched out in the name of elusive ‘sustainability’²; the great late-industrial expanses show themselves as ‘dense deserts’, kilometric voids, ruins of a bygone era that triggered radical socio-ecological changes. This has left a very high price to pay: environmental disaster, cancer, neonatal diseases, and the highest mortality rates in Sicily.

In these scenarios, characterised by risk and a general condition of existential uncertainty, different substances produce a ‘second nature’; starting with oil, understood as ‘matter’ and as ‘history’, plants, animals and human beings are residual presences in an altered environment, where the extractive areas overlap agricultural land and pastures, cultivated spaces with perforated lands; personal interests and environmental protection. The different cities, of which Gela is made up, seem to merge with each other, but each of them reflects the omnipresent ‘industrial city’, and, in some ways, they are the consequence, (even in the photographic space): the ruins of classical antiquity coexist with the waste of the recent past, the signs left by human beings allow us to understand what could have been and is not.

Visible and invisible, manifest and occult, past and present are confused to the point of giving us the impression of not understanding exactly what we are seeing, or what kind of space we are crossing, forcing us to think about what can be directly photographed and what can only be evoked.

To account for this complexity, the contemporary decadent scenario is counterposed with the iconic images of the industrial epoch which I found in the multimodal virtues of the postcards (Gugganig and Schor 2020), personally purchased in some shops in the city, and from private collectors.

What is the role of these images in the identity formation of the city, in the permanent tension between shown and hidden, near and far? What are the implications of these representations in political and patrimonial terms?

As the anthropological literature about tourism shows, touristic images, and especially postcards, could be intended as a political representation of identity, and a way to show the “authenticity” of a place (Selwin 1996) that becomes a “locality” (Simonicca 2015).

“There are no new postcards from Gela, because there is nothing more to see in Gela”, said the owner of a shop, when I went to look for postcards of the city.

¹ The visual survey was conducted within the project, “*Eco-frictions of the Anthropocene*” (Research Project of National Relevance, (PRIN) Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research). The project was carried out in the Sicilian Provinces of Syracuse, Caltanissetta and Messina, in collaboration with the researchers, Mara Benadusi, Alessandro Lutri, and Andrea Ravenda, and with the supervision of Mara Benadusi (University of Catania), and Bernardino Palumbo (University of Messina). Available: <https://www.ecofrizioni.it/en/about-2/>

² On the problematic ‘green’ reconversion process, see the works of Lutri (2018), Saitta (2009), Turco (2018).

In that 'nothing more' is held in the ethnographer's/photographer's eye, attempting to make this imagined, yet dense void visible.

As "multifaceted objects" (Andriotis and Mavrič 2013: 35), a visual and tactile media, postcards could be read as documentary images that testify a precise sensibility and gaze, the will of a specific era connected to the industrial imagery and its propaganda, symbols of a dream dyed black, reflections of a contradictory and excluding "progress".

In a world that now seems distant, postcards were travelling images which transformed every element linked to industrialization into an iconic heritage, a visual vehicle to communicate Gela's desirable identity.



PHOTO 1: Gela, train station. Postcard.



PHOTO 2: Herd grazing in the Gela countryside. In the background, on the left, a drill for oil extraction. In 1956, at a depth of 3400 metres, the first oil field was established in the Piana del Signore.



PHOTO 3: Acropolis of Gela, the remains of the ancient city built by Cretan settlers, dating from the sixth century B.C. In the background, the petrochemical plants. Today the archaeological site cannot be visited due to the lack of funds necessary for the conservation and maintenance of the site. Postcard.

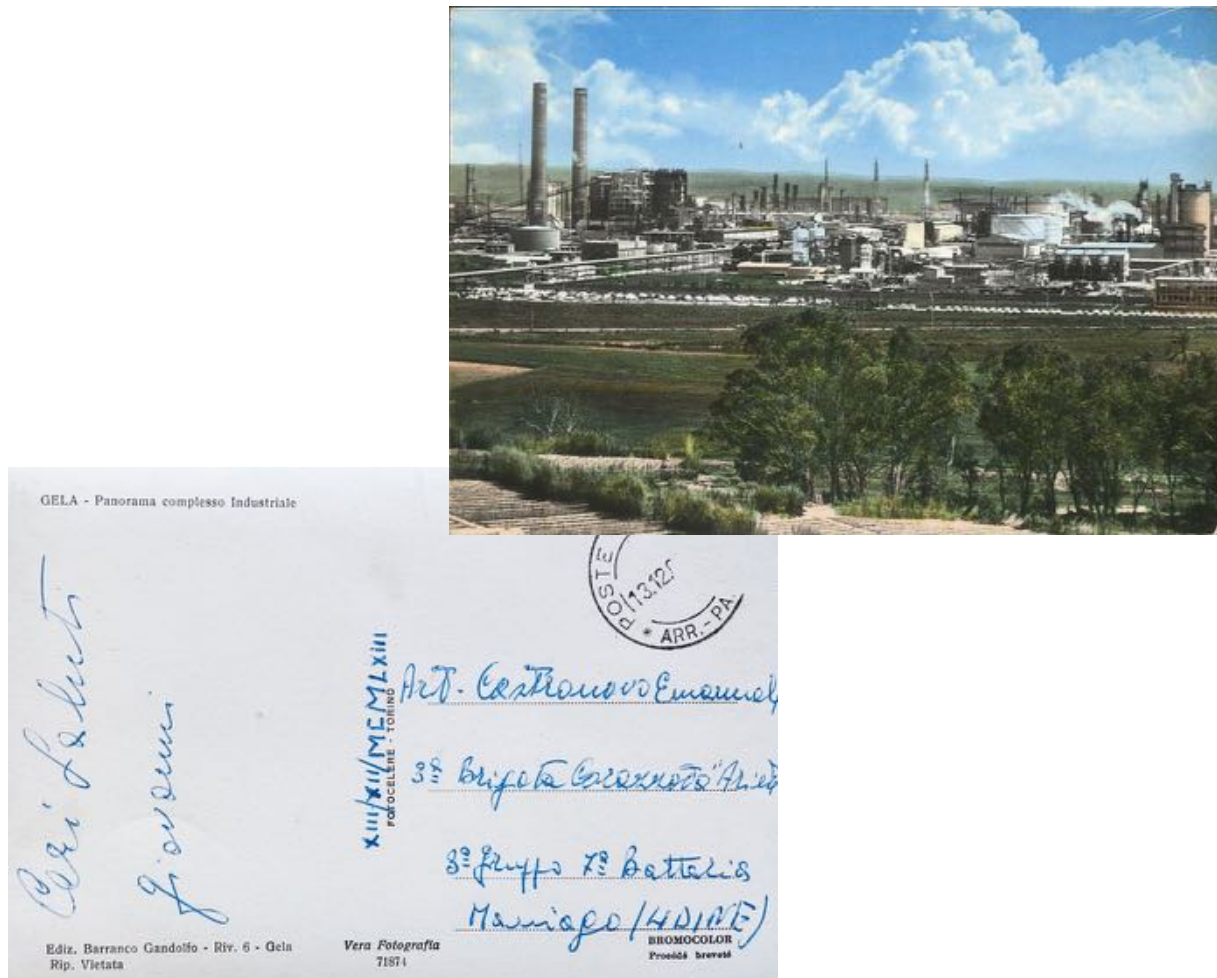


PHOTO 4: Gela, panorama of the industrial complex. Travelled postcard, dated 13 December 1963.



PHOTO 5: Gela, Macchitella District, Eni Group Club. Section "E. Mattei ". The neighbourhood was created in the 1960s as a satellite of the petrochemical centre. Totally separated in urban and social terms from the rest of the city, it offered accommodation to Eni employees.



PHOTO 6: Gela, Macchitella district. Billiard room inside the Eni Group Club. In the 1960s the neighbourhood was equipped with a series of unimaginable comforts for the local inhabitants, such as the continuous availability of drinking water and health, commercial and cultural services, such as a hospital, a shopping centre and a cinema-theatre.



PHOTO 7: Until the industrial boom of the 1960s, Gela and the surrounding areas were mainly characterised by an agricultural economy. Today the land, the air and the aquifers are severely compromised by the damage of emissions, plant losses and the spill of pollutants.



PHOTO 8: Gela, the petrochemical centre seen from the city. Postcard.



PHOTO 9: Gela has higher percentages of congenital malformations than the Italian and European average. Some recent surveys estimate that in the last fifteen years at least 450 children have been born with malformations due to environmental pollution.



PHOTO 10: The first offshore drilling rig in Europe (1958), built in the United States and called “Scarabeo”, together with the Saipem motor ship, used for oil exploration at sea. Postcard.



PHOTO 11: Bath-house, “La Conchiglia” (seashell), and, in the background, the “Scarabeo”. La Conchiglia was inaugurated in 1958 and enjoyed national fame, hosting social events and personalities from the world of entertainment, culture and politics. It was built in reinforced concrete on the remains of an ancient bathing establishment which from the 19th century was only installed in the summer season. Postcard.



PHOTO 12: The remains of the "Conchiglia" today. Its decline began in the 1980s, mainly due to oil pollution of the waters and sea currents that caused a progressive retreat of the coast. Today the structure is under seizure.



PHOTO 13: Eni refinery plants.



PHOTO 14: Drill in the plains of Gela. Postcard, detail.



PHOTO 15: The effects of pollution on the health of the local population are devastating. Numerous medical reports have established the correlation between the presence of different polluting chemicals and the high rates of cancer.



PHOTO 16: In the Macchitella district, the streets bear the names of the Eni executives; this one in particular is dedicated to Enrico Mattei, the founder of Eni.



PHOTO 17: Gela. Oil area - pump for the extraction of crude oil. Postcard.



PHOTO 18: Gela, refinery. Torch chimney in operation. The torches burn the gases eliminated in the production plant.



PHOTO 19: "Greetings from Gela". Postcard. Among the sites of interest in the city, also the drilling probe of the oil zone.

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