Issn: 2282-0876

n. 13, gennaio-giugno 2019

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Photography against Narrative

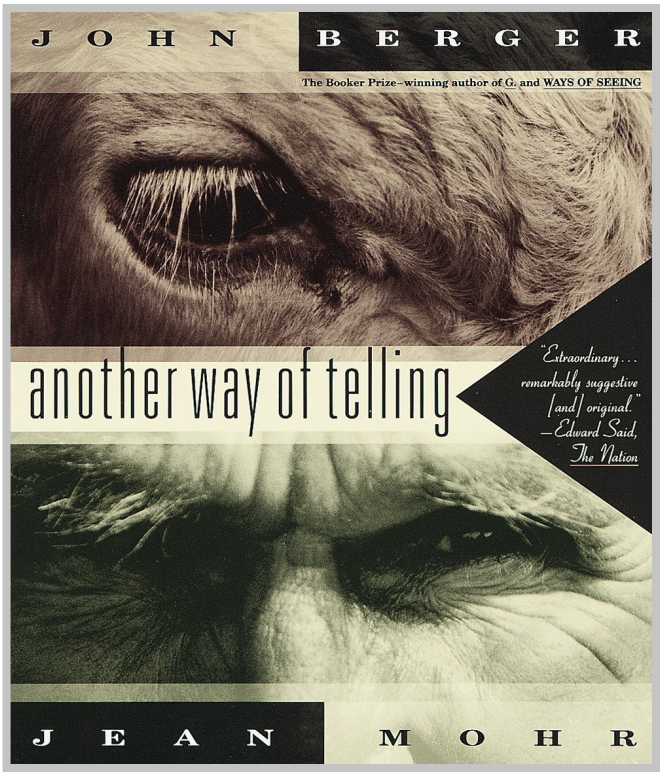
Starting from a clear delimitation of the field, focused on theoric and methodological perspectives deriving from the narrative reading of photography – not from photographic sequences – the contribution highlights some relevant remarks about bias and default opinions that interfere with the interpretation of the photographic medium. Thus, the author's reflections on the temporal dimension of photography, or on the distinction between 'image' and 'picture' proposed by Mitchell, help to better define a progressive authonomy of photographic language.

1. Stories, a universal feature?

«Innombrables sont les récits du monde» (There are countless forms of narrative in the world), said Roland Barthes in one of the founding essays of modern narratology.[1]

Yet the ubiquity of stories, storytelling and story worlds does not mean that any cultural practice is automatically open to narrative. Neither does it involve that narratological approach of stories can follow a universal methodology, as was certainly the dream of those who elaborated narratology as a scientific paradigm in the 1960s. In the following pages, I would like to address some of the issues raised by the narrative reading of photography, which seems to have become a kind of default option for the interpretation of photography in general, as if all pictures had suddenly become narrative (a bias that has sometimes jeopardized my own reflection on the topic).[2]

For clarity's sake, I want to specify without further delay that my own take on photography is based here on the classic production and publication format of the medium, namely the single, individual picture. Photographic genres or subgenres such as the picture story (in journalism), the photo novel (in popular and media culture), or the photo sequence (in visual and fine arts), for instance, will not be examined. Although the importance of these forms and practices is crucial for a correct understanding of photography in its diversity and complexity, the intrinsic sequentiality of these genres and subgenres sets them somewhat apart. As a matter of fact, one should avoid the danger of making a confusion between the narrative analysis of photography itself, provided there is such a thing as photography 'in itself', and the narrative analysis of sequential, that is multi-images photography, where the narrative dimension may depend on the mere fact that the viewer is confronted with a string, a chain, a succession of images, which may therefore become narrativized regardless of their own form and content. In other words: sequential photography is a type of photog-



raphy that deserves a specific form of analysis (as shown for instance by the example of nonnarrative readings of the photo novel).[3] However, it cannot as such be used as an argument in favor of the narrative dimension of photography in general.

This problem is brilliantly exemplified by John Berger[4] in his comments on the narrative limitations of photography and the possible ways of superseding them –in his case by turning toward a new type of sequential photography, not one that reproduces an underlying and already scripted narrative, like in journalistic picture stories or mass media photo novels, but as a sequential arrangement that manages to maintain the two major aspects of photography as a narrative medium: the ambivalence of its meanings as well as its orientation toward the past, including personal and collective memory (and thus not toward the futures, as Berger claims is the case in cinema).

2. Narrative skepticism

There is a paradox, and even a stimulating *a priori*, in our thinking on photography and narrative. On the one hand, we all agree that 'every picture tells a story' (a conviction that is further strengthened by the no less widely accepted idea that 'one picture tells more than thousand words'). On the other hand, we never exactly know which is the story that is actually told, since the fixed nature of the photography, which presents only a slice of time, never a full-fledged story, does not often contain itself the basic units of a narrative, such as for instance the distinction, within the visual form displayed by the image, between a 'before' and an 'after', although the digital turn in photography certainly has made possible the technique of what art historians call 'continuous narrative', that is the representation of successive moments within one single frame, a type of visual storytelling that one-point perspective painting as introduced at the Renaissance seemed to have condemned as anachronistic and old-fashioned.[5] Granted, the viewer can always project a narrative on the nonnarrative elements or aspects of a fixed image, including in these cases where the narrative impulse is not triggered by story-enhancing or story-inducing content matter or special techniques such as for instance the representation of a 'pregnant moment' (a classic trick of history painting) or, more importantly for the specific field of photography, the presence of narrative captions.[6] Yet these various interpretive opportunities the viewer can rely on do not completely overrule the fixed image's intrinsic difficulty to display a story in a more or less objective and readable way. As a narrative medium, photography inevitably depends on the active contribution of the reader –which is of course not harmful to the narrative interpretation of the photographic object (one can produce a very convincing story when watching a picture showing just a pebble on the beach), but which definitely suggests that the story elements are more on the side of the viewer than on that of the picture.

However, the initial paradox should not only be seen as an invitation to complement or supplement the fixed image by mobile or dynamic features or techniques. It can also be interpreted as the first step toward a new reflection on the relationship between photography and narrative, which goes beyond the mere possibility (or not) of narratively reading nonnarrative material. And in this regard I would like to raise four questions.

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3. How photography questions narrative

The first one and also the most general one has to do with the very status of narrative in our relationship toward photography. Generally speaking, the relative lack of storytelling in photography is seen in rather negative terms, as if photography were missing something (namely: narrative) that other media (and the example of cinema immediately comes to mind) contain more naturally. In light of the ongoing competition between media, which all strive for cultural and economic hegemony, it is a logical move to argue that photography is for that reason in danger of being remediated by the moving images of film, for instance – and I am following here the 'old versus new' supersession approach as popularized by Bolter and Grusin in their book *Remediation*,[7] actually an updated version of McLuhan's *Understanding Media* at the internet age.[8] Photography, in this perspective, would be in high need of being 'repurposed' (another key term of Bolter and Grusin), that is of incorporating elements of 'stronger' media, once again film for example, to survive in the permanently shifting media uses of our world.

This point, however, is open to debate. It could be argued no less that photography does not lack time and narrative at all, but that instead this impression of lack refers to an imperialist use of narrative that wipes out the specific materiality of photography –and more generally of many other documents and media that narrative analysis is currently cannibalizing. The idea that the story 'behind' (or underneath) an image is more appropriate to disclose the truth of this image is a claim that many critics make almost spontaneously, but that does not resist further thinking. Storytelling can detach us from the specific means and meanings of a work, as demonstrated by the antinarrative stance of those, practitioners and theoreticians alike, that I would like to call story-skepticists: Michael Fried or Clement Greenberg in art history, and Jean Ricardou in literature, for instance, who all have claimed that framing a work as narrative may lead to various types of misreading, more particularly to a lack of sensitivity toward the formal and material aspects of the work.[9] Photography in this sense is not a narratively poor medium, it is a medium that hints at the poverty of narrative when it comes down to address certain works, styles, periods, authors, or media whose key features are other than narrative.

A second remark concerns the distinction between narrative and time. Photography may not be the perfect example of storytelling with the help of a visual medium, but its temporal dimension is dramatically present and powerful. This way of looking at photography supposes however that we shift from the product, the picture as we can see it, to the process, that is the way in which a picture is planned, made, reproduced, distributed, etc. – a long and complex, often collective process that stretches before and after the actual handling of the camera, the taking of the picture, the printing of the image, and so on and so forth, to take just some very simple examples. All media possess such a temporal dimension, but the case of photography is all the more inspiring and suggestive since we still live in the ideology of the 'you push the button, we do the rest' – and after all, modern digital programs such as Instagram do no deliver a message that is very different from that of Kodak in the 1880s. Yet this temporality is not just the sum of actions that come before and after the taking or making of a picture, it is also something that radically changes our view of the very nature of this picture. In analog photography, the negative is different from the (vintage) print, the print is different from its reproduction in a book, the reproduction in a book is different from its reappropriation by other means, etc.: each step produces a new image, and the awareness of these steps inevitably affects

our reading of the image, whatever its position on the time line. In digital photography, the migration of the image from one screen to another, not to speak of the print variations of each of these occurrences, often involves huge differences that touch upon any possible parameter of the image and whose consequences for the image's reading and interpretation are undeniable.

At first sight, the difficulty of telling the production of the image from the temporal process that brings and keeps it materially and semiotically alive seems light years away from the issue of narrative and storytelling, yet here as well the example of photography helps make a case against the conventional reading of narrative, which tends to reduce the notion of time to a feature of the story's content (namely: the temporal arrangement of the plot elements) as well as to put between brackets the temporality of the larger processes in which the narrative of the product is itself embedded. Photography, in this regard, reframes the relationships between time and narrative. Time is not only a dimension of what is being told in the picture as a product, it is also a key dimension of the very act of storytelling as a process, regardless of what the storyteller is showing or telling in the image itself.

Induced by the relationship between product and process –and this is a third point I would like to make –, the intrinsic temporality of any photographic item also draws attention to the specific materiality of the picture, which is in the technical sense of the term never 'just an image', that is the idea we have of a visual representation (and in addition we know, as W.J.T. Mitchell has convincingly demonstrated, that «there are no visual media»[10] and that visuality is always mixed with other media and other senses), but also a 'picture', that is 'an image with or in a certain medium'. Images are (partly) on the side of the concept, the idea, if not the ideal, while pictures are completely material objects. In other words: images can be mentally imagined, no pun intended, they are mental representations of a give object, person, event, concept, etc. Pictures, instead, are inextricably linked with the materiality of the medium that makes them exist.

Obviously, photography is not 'a' medium, that is a single, unique, independent medium. According to the way it is materialized, the same photographic image can be materialized as many different pictures: for instance negatives, vintage prints, print photos (and these forms are countless), photographs printed on other supports than paper (from silk screens to handkerchiefs, from T-shirts to projections on water), 3D pictures, even 'moving' photographs as currently allowed by all kind of software manipulations.[11]

My fourth and last point is that in the context of narrative analysis this mediologial and material diversity is anything but a detail. If we take materiality seriously, and there are good reasons to do so, it is clear that only medium-specific interpretations can be considered meaningful as far as the study of pictures is concerned. A more general and abstract form of narrative analysis that examines narrative forms and structures underneath the material surface automatically decodes pictures as images as a way of questioning of fundamental dichotomies as articulated in the semiotic square (one may think here as an example of Greimas's actantial scheme of his reading of stories). Such a methodological and theoretical shift is obviously always possible, but one should remain aware of the fact that by doing so one moves from one type of narratology, namely medium-specific (and thus picture-oriented) narratology, different for each medium being addressed, to a completely different type of narratology, namely general or medium-insensitive (and thus image-based) narratology.

This distinction is necessary to understand the strong resistance to narrative in the work of the story-skepticists hinted at above. If they consider narrative analysis so harmful to visual analysis, what they are referring to is less the medium-specific type of narratology than the universalizing variant of it, which tends to repress the material aspects of the pictures while highlighting the semantic dimensions of the image. The compatibility of materialist picture analysis and certain forms of medium-specific narratology is vital to, for instance, the field of 'abstract comics',[12] which makes room for rhythm and color-induced stories and storytelling in pictures which at first sight look totally deprived of any content or narrative. Molotiu's approach can of course be easily transferred to the field of photography, which may give birth to medium-specific approaches at the level of what Groupe Mu calls the 'plastic' sign (as opposed to the 'iconic' sign, which displays recognizable and lexically identifiable units).[13] It is not an exaggeration to suggest that, from this point of view, the importance of photography for making the case for medium-specific and thus anti-general narratologies cannot be underestimated.

Verbal stories can easily – well, more or less easily – be summarized, paraphrased, translated, if not adapted into other media, and this creates the illusion that a medium-specific analysis is not always useful or required. In photography, however, the equivalent of these manipulations generally relies upon tagging. Two pictures can for instance be compared from a narrative point of view provided one succeeds in tagging some of the figures represented in the picture as 'victims' or 'perpetrators' (and it should be noted here that words such as 'victims' and 'perpetrators' do not belong to the sphere of the picture but to that of the image, in the already discussed terminology). But contrary to what happens when one tags a verbal text, where words such as 'victim' or 'perpetrator' may literally appear, pictures do not display this type of information, certainly not in this direct and transparent way (even if it would be absurd to believe that one can always take at face value what is said or written in a verbal text). For this reason, the tagging of a picture is a semiotic operation that unescapably converts it into an image – and careful users of visual material never forget about this difference. The awareness of the gap between tag-free pictures and tagged images remains very strong and no one will ever claim that a tag-based analysis offers an in-depth analysis of the medium-specific layers of a picture. Crowdsourcing for instance has become increasingly popular in photographical heritage research, but as far as medium-specific analysis is concerned, its success is as much a symptom than a solution: crowdsourcing may help fine-tune our idea of photography as a set of images, but its effects on our knowledge on photography as picture are not always clear. Moreover, the fact that much crowdsourcing work almost naturally turns into narrativizing the image shows that there is a kind of implicit link between the difficulty to tackle medium-specificity and the eagerness to leap into stories and storytelling.[14]

4. Which narratology for photo analysis?

The previous reflections should not be taken as a warning against the dangers of the narrative analysis of photography, on the contrary. Narratology remains a much needed and highly appreciated tool. However, it makes sense to make a plea in favor of a strongly medium-specific analysis, that tries to take into account, for example by acknowledging its own limits, the nonnarative elements of pictures that many narrative analyses easily discard or ignore. More particularly, I think narrative readings of photography can highly benefit from the foregrounding of the temporal dimensions of photography as an ongoing

process, by focusing on the way pictures are made, changed, moved, and appropriated, as well as from the attempt to ask whether a narrative is actually helpful or harmful for a better understanding of a photograph as picture. Taking care of these different horizons and thresholds can allow for a new start of narrative analysis in the field of photography, which should not be reduced to the recycling or application of tools, conventions, and terminologies borrowed from fields such as literature or art history, such as, for instance, the suggestion of a pregnant moment, the representation of an underlying verbal story, or the interaction between picture and caption. Photography and narrative analysis are no enemies, but what photography needs is a kind of narratology that claims its independence from what narratologists have been doing in the past.

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[2] J. Baetens, M. Bleyen, 'Photonarrative', in M.L. Ryan, M. Grishakova (eds.), *Intermediality and Storytelling*, Berlin, De Gruyter (Narratologia Series), 2010, pp. 165-182.
[3] J. Baetens, 'The photonovel: Stereotype as Surprise', *History of Photography*, 37-2, 2013, pp. 137-152 and Id., *Pour le roman-photo*, Bruxelles, Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2017.
[4] J. Berger, J. Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, London, Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative Society, 1982.
[5] L. Andrews, *Story and Space in Renaissance Art. The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
[6] C. Scott, *The Spoken Image. Photography & Language*, London, Reaktion Books, 1999.
[7] J.D. Bolter, R. Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1999.
[8] M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Toronto, Toronto University Press, 1964.
[9] For an overview of these debates, see J. Baetens, 'Nouvelle narratologie, nouvau récit', *Questions de communication*, 17, 2017, pp. 231-244.
[10] W.J.T. Mitchell, 'There Are No Visual Media', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4-2, 2005, pp. 257-266.
[11] I. Hoelzl, R. Marie, *Softimage. Towards a New Theory of the Digital Image*, Bristol, Intellect – Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2015.
[12] See A. Molotiu (ed.), *Abstract Comics*, Seattle, Fantagraphics, 2010 and J. Baetens, 'Abstraction in comics', *SubStance*, 40-1, 2011, pp. 94-113.
[13] Groupe Mu, *Traité du signe visuel*, Paris, Seuil, 1993.
[14] J. Baetens, 'Crowdsourcing: A Critical Discussion on Some Issues of a Challenging New Practice in the Digitization of Photographic Heritage', *Recherches en communication*, 42, 2017, pp. 203-211.