Joining the dots:
overcoming the photograph’s temporality problem

“A narrative is an account of events occurring over time. It is irreducibly durative.”
(Jerome Bruner 1991: 6)

“Photographs aren’t good at telling stories. Stories require a beginning, middle and end. They require the progression of time. Photographs stop time. They are frozen. Mute.”
(Alec Soth 2006)

These quotes, from a narratologist and a photographer, seem to make a similar point; the former appears to provide an explanation for the latter. Whilst a single photograph can share many characteristics of narrative (settings, characters, themes, styles etc) with other forms of communication, it stumbles on the core trait of a narrative: depicting change over time.

However, there is an argument that even if the former statement is true, the latter does not automatically follow – perhaps the singular photograph’s assumed inability to depict a progression of time is just an obstacle to overcome rather than a fundamental truth. This essay seeks to evaluate the intrinsic and extrinsic techniques available to circumvent this temporal limitation of the still photograph.

Defining terms

Narrative is defined well by Bruner above. For the purposes of this essay story and narrative are interchangeable (narratologists may disagree). To place parameters around the discussion, this analysis is primarily concerned with intentional narratives; a viewer may sometimes discern a narrative because the photographer created an ambiguous sense of ‘narrativity’ – “that is, the qualities of a story, minus the story itself” (Marien 2012: 79), but these images are not our core subject. Intentional narrative can mean both factual and fictional images; documentary is more obviously built on narratives, but advertising and fine art can be too. The difference in techniques used partly depends on the degree of direct authorial control by the photographer: lower for documentary, higher for advertising or art.

This essay acknowledges the existence of a literal approach to depicting the passage of time in a still photograph, namely long exposure times. The resultant images may show time or movement but any 'story' evoked is simplistic to the point of abstraction. We focus here on less literal, more inventive approaches to the problem.
Theories of narrative

Ania Nalecka was referring to a photobook when she said “it gives you dots to connect, not drawing the lines. The question is how far you put the dots apart.” (2016) but the concept extends to all narratives, which are a combination of author and reader contributions (Barthes 1977: 142-148). In many textual narratives, the author’s portion is almost total, while others use techniques such as the ‘unreliable narrator’ to shift the burden of comprehension towards the reader. The single photo narrative is perhaps analogous to the six-word short story usually attributed to Ernest Hemingway: “For sale: baby shoes. Never worn” (citation disputed). In being short on ‘dots’ and long on ‘gaps’, this is an almost photographic narrative; the reader brings 90% of the story. This is how most single image narratives work.

If we accept that any narrative is partly created in the mind of the reader (viewer) then the temporal limitations of the still photograph begin to weaken. We enter what Stephen Shore describes as the mental model of photography, where the contents of the frame are augmented by cognitive processes by the viewer (2010: 117). Using Stuart Hall’s communication theory, the photographic message is deliberately encoded at the moment of production with the intent of it being appropriately decoded at the moment of consumption (1980: 128). This decoding places the image in a cognitive context where progression of time can be implied.

Peter Wollen categorised temporal levels of signification in photography as states, processes and events (in Wells 2003: 77). States are unchanging and so have no narrative ability, while processes (dynamically changing) and events (one-off changes) have at least two data points, even if the viewer needs to imagine one of them.

Wollen initially appears to support my hypothesis: “The fact that images may themselves appear as punctual, virtually without duration, does not mean that the situations that they represent lack any quality of duration.” (ibid: 77), though subsequently concludes that: “Still photographs, then, cannot be seen as narratives in themselves, but as elements of narrative.” (ibid: 78). He accepts that an image can represent a durative process or event yet denies its status as a narrative – a distinction I find curious.

I will now examine three areas of technique, not mutually exclusive, that can provide the additional data points needed to form a narrative from a single image.

Text as context

A simple method of providing more ‘dots’ is to use text. This can be as concise as a caption to a news photograph or as wordy as an artist’s statement in a gallery. Barthes describes the three levels of message in the photographic image as denotative, connotative (to be covered shortly) and linguistic (1977: 36). While some images can communicate a narrative with no caption, others need at least minimal anchoring text to convey a meaningful story.

Compare two iconic images from the Vietnam War: McCullin’s photo contains enough information for a viewer needs to construct the simple, self-contained narrative ‘he went
into battle, he saw horrors, he is changed’. The caption provides additional factual information, but even without it, the photo can act as a 'closed' narrative.

Shell-shocked marine, Hue, 1968 by Don McCullin

On the other hand, Nick Ut’s photograph shows that something horrific has happened but only makes sense as a narrative when accompanied by a caption that specifies it followed a napalm attack. The text provides the ‘before’ that places the ‘after’ in a chronological context. Without this, the image of a naked child fleeing soldiers is either cryptic or open to wild misinterpretation.

Children fleeing a napalm bomb attack, Trang Bàng, South Vietnam, 1972 by Nick Ut

John Berger advises caution in adding text to an image as it may multiply the implied veracity of both:

“The photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalisation, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph. Together the two then become very powerful; an open question appears to have been fully answered.” (2013: 66)
Extrinsic signification

A less direct form of guiding the viewer to a narrative is to use connotations based on shared cultural codes. The placement of signifiers (metaphors and metonyms) can provide the cognitive pointers necessary to steer the viewer towards the intended story. When signifier is equated to signified in the mind of the viewer, it can provide a missing data point that can be added to the denoted image to construct an implied narrative. Recognisable characters or other references to commonly known stories can provide cognitive shortcuts.

Elliott Erwitt’s wedding scene projects a ‘love triangle’ narrative simply by presenting archetypes.

Brian Cummings’ Fairy Fatales series provides feminist rewrites of traditional tales. This not only relies on, but adds to, the Rapunzel story to create a new narrative.
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In these two examples the viewer provides the build-up and the photo provides the punchline. In other instances the image is called upon to project both backwards and forwards in time, or as Berger says, “When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future.” (2013: 64). Outside of constructed tableaux, this kind of narrative is harder to achieve than a simple past-present or a present-future pairing. In factual photography the misunderstood notion of ‘the decisive moment’ (usually erroneously attributed to Henri Cartier-Bresson) seemed to imply that a well-timed single image could provide the fulcrum of an implied story.

Bate suggests that “The viewer of the picture can run their imagination back and forth across the time before and after the depicted action to imagine the sequence of events constituting the story” (2009: 57-58). However, I remain unconvinced that this is inherently applicable to factual photography. In reality, it is the retrospective historical viewing, where extrinsic knowledge is added to the image – i.e. the viewer believes they know what happened before and after – that provides this illusion of peripeteia. Ultimately, I prefer Swarkowski’s interpretation that the moment is decisive to the picture, not the story (2007: 100).

Visual techniques

Along with extrinsic approaches, one can organise elements within the frame to support a desired narrative reading. One method is to mimic other forms of narrative. For example, one can capture or construct an image that places chronological signifiers in a directional reading from left to right or top to bottom, following conventions of written language (assuming a western audience).

Jeff Wall’s Passerby uses the brightly-lit right-hand edge to depict the present and the murky centre portion to imply something that has just happened, or nearly happened.
Though less common, implied front-to-back depth can also be used to evoke a sense of movement and therefore chronological narrative. Larry Fink is a master of compositional depth, and here uses the device of the doorway and forward motion to imply the transition from one space (and time) to another. The fact that it is a birthday cake that emerges enhances the sense of a temporal narrative.

A related approach is to use internal framing devices to communicate separate pockets of time. Whether intentional or not, this windowed image from Marc Riboud emulates the look of comic strips, implying discontinuous time.

Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler have used the device of dividing walls to imply discontinuous time in tableau-style photographs.
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One can divide the frame to imply alternative scenarios rather than sequential time. An early example of this is Oscar Reijlander’s pioneering photomontage *The Two Ways of Life*, which manages to show a present and two possible futures.

A more contemporary example is provided by Craig Semetko, whose balanced image evokes a love story with two different endings.
An imaginative way of implying a narrative in a single image is by repetition of a character. If multiple people in an image are sufficiently homogenous, an interpretation can arise that depicts them as the same character moving through time.

This borrows from a historic art technique that depicts a character in different portions of a painting to note past, present and future, and simultaneously adds a cinematic dimension to the still. This repetition can be observed, as by Giacomelli, or constructed (actually digitally manipulated) as by Goicolea here.
My own practice

I haven’t consciously sought to include a sense of narrative in single images a great deal, with one notable exception to date. I adopted a combination of still life and the Reijlander ‘alternative scenario’ approach in a constructed narrative about a decision to take a career break to study. The image can be read as either two competing halves, or a left-right transition from past to future, but in either case a change of state – a narrative – is communicated.

I am, however, increasingly thinking about how to consciously build a sense of narrative direction into single images, even if they also add up to create an overarching narrative in the form of a photo essay. This is a direction I intend to take my evolving documentary photography style towards.

Conclusion

I believe the examples given – using text as context, extrinsic signification and intrinsic visual techniques – provide sufficient evidence that it is possible to tell a story in a single photograph. The key to this position is the Barthesian view that the reader is a kind of author, working with information provided by the originating author to construct meaning (1977: 142-148). Communicating a narrative in a single image is a matter of placing sufficient clues for the viewer to connect the dots.

To return to Soth’s quote: a photograph may be frozen but it does not need to be mute, if you can listen to what your mind is saying when you look at it.
Sources


