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.

Narrative can mean both factual and fictional images; documentary is more obviously built on stories, but advertising and fine art can be too. Here we will focus on documentary and constructed tableaux for examples.

General 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 extrinsic and intrinsic approaches that can provide the additional data points needed to form a narrative from a single image.

Extrinsic techniques

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:

Don McCullin’s photo contains enough information for a viewer to construct a simple, self-contained narrative such as ‘he went into battle, he saw horrors, he is changed’. His uniform and rifle denote ‘soldier’; his dirty hands, face and clothes denote recent action (the ‘event’); his expression, with blank gaze and slightly open mouth, signify his shock at what he saw. The caption provides additional factual information, but even without it, the photo can act as a ‘closed’ narrative.
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On the other hand, Nick Ut’s photograph shows that some horrific event has happened but only makes sufficient 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 open to misinterpretation; whilst it contains signifiers, it remains incomplete as a narrative without the caption.

The McCullin photo was one of the first images in the Tate exhibition and book Conflict-Time-Photography (2014), which shows us how aftermath photography relies on extrinsic information; a landscape becomes a battlefield, or an execution site, once a caption is added.

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)

A less direct form of guiding the viewer using extrinsic information 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 by presenting archetypes in an identifiable context. The dress denotes a wedding, and her expression suggests suppressed rage. It’s fair to assume that the man to her left is the groom; his bouffant hair and protective demeanour say ‘nice guy’. The slick-haired, smirking man plays the 'bad boy'. A concerned best friend is visible to the right. The whole scene implies a preceding infidelity ‘event’. 

In this example 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 information is added to the image – i.e. the viewer thinks they know what happened before and after – that provides this illusion of peripeteia (in the Goldberg photo here, no-one got shot; he put the gun away).

Ultimately, I prefer Swarkowski’s interpretation that the moment is decisive to the picture, not the story (2007: 100).
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Intrinsic techniques

One can organise elements within the frame to visually support a desired narrative reading, though these still rely on shared codes to a degree. 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 an immediate prior event. That the figure on the right is looking back to the heavily shaded/shady central figure gives an impression that something has just happened, or nearly happened. Both figures are in motion, enhancing the sense that this narrative hinges on a split second prior to the shot.
A related approach is to use internal framing devices to communicate separate pockets of time. Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler have used the device of dividing walls to imply discontinuous time in tableaux photographs. The sense here is of the shadow on the left representing an earlier, caged incarnation of the figure on the right, seen emerging into a brighter, more open setting. The window, half shaded and half lit, signifies a transition event.

One can divide the frame to imply alternative scenarios rather than sequential time. The classic example is Reijlander’s *The Two Ways of Life*, which shows a present and two possible futures, though a contemporary example is provided by Craig Semetko, whose balanced image evokes a love story with alternative endings. The left couple sit together but not embracing, and the sullen figure in front appears to be regretting a lost love. The more tactile couple on the right is being observed by a more relaxed equivalent. The background could be read as a memory, the foreground the present.
An imaginative way of implying a narrative, inspired by both painting and cinema, is by repetition of a character. If multiple figures in an image are sufficiently similar, it can suggest the same character moving through time. Giacomelli’s dancing priests can be read as a single archetype moving around in a clockwise circle before collapsing on the ground, then regaining composure. The strong figure-to-ground contrasts enhances this sense of animated motion.

Conclusion

I have sought to include a sense of narrative in single images in some of my work 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 – an event, therefore a narrative – is communicated by the placement of multiple signifiers.
I am increasingly thinking about how to consciously build a sense of narrative direction into single documentary images, even if they also add up to create an overarching narrative in the form of a photo essay.

I believe the examples given – using 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.

(1986 words)
Bibliography


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List of illustrations

p3  Shell-shocked marine, Hue, 1968 by Don McCullin

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

p4  Bratsk wedding, 1967 by Elliott Erwitt

p5  Room 17, Riviera Hotel, San Francisco, California, 1987 by Jim Goldberg

  Passerby, 1996 by Jeff Wall

p6  Stripping, 1998 by Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler

  Hanoi Lonely Hearts, 2010 by Craig Semetko

p7  Senigallia, Italy, 1963 by Mario Giacomelli

  Two Ways of (Still) Life, 2015 by Rob Townsend