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Telling Stories with Photo Archives

Intermedial Agency in Documentary Comics

With the emergence of monster archives (Nora 1972) and the acceleration of image production, visual journalism struggles with the excess images in an incessant flux. One way of dealing with such an excess of pictures and halt the flow is to narrativize visual archives, organizing, sequencing, plotting, and administering information and reader expectations to confer meaning and contextualize these stories. Endowed with an extraordinary malleability, photography has frequently been accommodated in various forms, from golden age magazine picture stories to multimedia reportage. This chapter's point of departure is to approach intermedial agency in the way photographic archives can be remediated in documentary comics, a phenomenon growing in recent decades, revealing very sophisticated forms of combining photographs sequentially. The aim here is to explore the potential of comics as a site for exercising archival remediation and how agency is distributed along these various medial instances. What happens when an archive from a classic photojournalism work is organized in comics format? How do different contexts of circulation and social-institutional frames may impact the reception? And what would be the most suitable formal strategies to remediate these materials? In the following pages, I will try to discuss this reconfiguration of photographic images through the perspective of intermediality (Thon 2016).

These documental photo narratives will be approached considering the medium-specific potentialities of the fixed photographic image and how they come up in different media. The materiality of photography will be a crucial aspect that contributes to shedding light on the specific ways photographic material can be selected from the archives and recombined as representing events arranged in a coherent plot. It is thus not the aim here to discuss single-picture narrativity, but to concentrate on the juxtaposition of archival photographs deliberately re-organized to tell a story. Nor is it the goal to investigate conceptual documentary photography based on the seriality of lists and inventories, but to reflect on the narrative potential of the documentary format.

Photonarrative is much more than the display of a preformatted or underlying script that is illustrated by a set of images representing each successive step of action. It is first and foremost an invitation to rethink the narrative dimension of photography itself completely, not by internal manipulation of the single image [. . .], but by the exploration of what it means to insert photography in a framework of spatial and temporal montage.

(Baetens and Bleyen 2010, 181)

Besides the cases of photonovels and *cine-róman* [cine-novel] (Baetens 2010, 2019b), the relation between comics and photography is a privileged space to investigate these hybrid formats (Pedri 2015; Schmid 2016; Flinn 2018). Despite growing recognition, I would like to focus on stories composed of images that were not originally produced in the comics medium, but that were later refashioned and repurposed (Bolter and Grusin 2000) to create compelling visual narratives. Although not new, digital technologies have undoubtedly increased the “fluidity” (Gervais 2016, 7) of photographs, and expanded the practice of incorporating and recombining archival material. I will discuss this repurposing of photographic archives in documentary comics as an example of intermedial agency, considering the distribution of agency between the various (human) actors assembling these comics, the materials, and technologies, the forms and distinctions of/between media as conceptual entities. Also, I will approach the different regimes, reading habits, and constraints involved in each field and institutional values, from artistic documentary practices to everyday visual journalism.

One of the most remarkable and often discussed examples of this is probably *Le Photographe* [*The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors without Borders*], by Guibert, Lefèvre, and Lemerrier (Picado 2015; Schmid 2016; Barbieri 2017; Egger 2018), a book compiled from an archive of more than fifteen thousand photographs taken by the protagonist Didier Lefèvre during a mission of Doctors without Borders in Afghanistan in 1986, combined with drawings by Emmanuel Guibert and page design by Frederic Lemerrier, forming a complex and elaborate triple presence of the photographer, the cartoonist, and the designer.

Yet, in this chapter, I will take as a case study the book *La Grieta* [The crack], by Carlos Spottorno and Guillermo Abril, which focuses on the crisis of immigration in Europe. The work has circulated and won multiple prizes in different domains, from more traditional journalistic vehicles to comics institutions. Unlike *Le Photographe*, however, *La Grieta* is composed only of photographs digitally altered to look like drawings – the mixed-use of photographic images and comics conventions already places it in a challenging border zone between formats and shifting institutional values. I will look at *La Grieta* from a formal perspective, exploring how some of the main aspects of comics can work when dealing with archives. Furthermore, I will consider the specific temporalities of publication and circulation. In the face of the frenetic flow of pictures mentioned above,

long-form visual storytelling could be seen as a form of slowing down the process, taming enormous archives (Farge 2013), bringing to a halt the unrelentless stream of images. Indeed, it was only through a retrospective remediation process, involving selecting the 750 photographs (taken from an archive of twenty-five thousand photos) and re-organizing the pictures in a book format, that *La Grieta* came to be published.

Comics and Agency Remediating Archives

The first important point in discussing the combination between agency and archives (Mademli 2021) is to understand the role of comics' affordances in this process of archival remediation. While many storytelling devices draw from archives (which have a non-narrative character) to develop all kinds of narratives, comics can be seen as an especially suitable site to deal with the complexity of enormous archives in the context of media convergence and intermedial adaptations. Jared Gardner notes an expressive number of comics that feature archives as essential themes in the stories, even calling for an "archival turn in the contemporary graphic narrative" (2006, 788):

It is the comic form that might be best suited to articulating the complex demands of the present new media age in relation to the media of the past. Perhaps ironically, given the avowed antipathy of many comics creators to new media technologies, the comic form is ideally suited to carrying on the vital work Benjamin called for generations earlier: making the present aware of its own "archive," the past that it is always in the process of becoming. (Gardner 2006, 803)

Hillary Chute goes beyond this, developing the idea of an "archival drive" (2012, n.pag.) behind comics grammar and emphasizing the dynamic features of archives instead of the static repository. As a collection of panels, the very comics medium already presents a particular "inclination to document" (Chute 2016, 2).

Comics makes the process of selecting, ordering, and preserving intelligible in a way few formats can: its very narrative syntax is an interplay of presence and absence, in which moments of time are selected and boxed (separated conventionally by bands of white space called "the gutter"). The actual juxtaposition of frames on the page calls overt attention to the basic grammar of comics as selection – to the rhythm of the displayed and the evacuated, and how they constitute each other. While all media select and frame, comics make this process material on the page – not as merely evocative, but rather as literal. (Chute 2012, n.pag.)

Comics offer a wide range of medial affordances that can accommodate archives and hold an intimate relationship with the practice of archival research

and the relation with manifestations of memory in general (Ahmed and Crucifix 2018). In addition, formal strategies, and material constraints – such as the multiple tensions between image and text, the coexistence of different temporalities on the same page, as well as the combination of numerous types of signs, styles, and materials – make comics a particularly privileged medium to exercise agency over archives and bring life to these visual narratives.

In this specific case, it is critical to recognize how these various technological, institutional, and semiotic medial affordances (Ossa and Wilde 2020) shape the tensions that arise when mechanic-based photographic archives are reassembled and framed as comics, which are usually composed of hand-made drawings. Furthermore, this clash should be addressed from the perspective of the specific consolidated constraints and reading expectations proper to the established genre of the documentary (Nichols 1991) as well as the interplay between opacity and transparency: On the one hand, we have the discussion around narrative immersion and graphic transparency (Marion 1993; Gaudreault 1999; Schneider 2012); on the other hand, the mythological quest for photographic realism and transparent pictures (Walton 1984).

News Pictures and the Present

Before advancing to a close reading of *La Grieta*, it is also crucial to consider how institutional agencies and social practices of picturing the news affect how temporalities are modeled (and how comics might propose alternatives). In an era of inflation of monster events, when we live in a perpetual state of super information, there is an urgency of an ever-present mediatization. Unlike art, news pictures' relation to its public "is structured around the temporality of the short-term" (Hill and Schwarz 2015, 5). They are the "fastest possible clip given the historical conditions of circulation at any given moment" (Hill and Schwarz 2015, 5). In such a context, photography seems like the natural medium to cultivate this relation to the present. It speeds up the image-making process, allowing for diminishing times between the click and the publication.

News pictures might be understood to visually construct every notion of contemporaneity that we might presume to enjoy. Breaking stories streaming through our smartphones operate in a different temporal register than long-form investigative pieces in the pages of weeklies and monthlies. All these temporalities, however, stand for "news time," which also stands for what we can know of our present moment. (Hill and Schwarz 2015, 8)

One of the elements that can shift the particular sense of temporality and determine its relative social force is the support (Hill and Schwarz 2015), the different

rhythms involved in the production and consumption of each publication type. From a production point of view, making comics usually takes a more extended period, which already distances the event from the publication. Hence, the temporality here is not tied to the imposed actual presence, but is determined by playing with possibilities of setting the pace, slowing down, going backward, and re-reading. Even when thinking of examples in documentary comics, the temporalities found in reading comics obey different rules. Accordingly, the slowness and endurance proper to the medium becomes an asset, a way of imposing a more reflexive pace (Schmid 2021, 227):

Documentary graphic narrative books set the materiality and traditional social prestige of the book and its gatekeeping institutions against the incessant flux of news and entertainment online, decelerating both the creation and the reception process. (Schmid 2021, 49)

Remediating photographs in a comic book hardcover form would be one of the many ways to slow down the urgency for live reporting and allow for other rhythms of publication outside the logic of instant publishing, allowing time to linger, reflect and transform events into intelligible narratives. It enables us to take things out of the flux, slowing down and shaping the event. Such a move helps to halt the unrelenting repetition of events.

From Photojournalism to Documentary Comics: Looking at *La Grieta* between Publishing Contexts

Between 2014 and 2016, photographer Carlos Spottorno and reporter Guillermo Abril – both from the newspaper *El País* [The country] – covered the immigration crisis in Europe, depicting three years of exploring the European Union's external borders from Africa to the Arctic. This material took several forms – it was first published in the magazine *El País Semanal*, then as a long-form multimedia reportage, containing online galleries and a short web documentary. Later, some of this material was repurposed and released as a book (which, by its turn, also became an exhibition on museum walls).

In a way, the concept of borders is central not only as the main theme of *La Grieta* – an attempt to focus on the cracks in immigration (hence the title) – but also as a way of looking at the book itself, as a migrant that aims to cross frontiers, to visit the margins (and to identify possible cracks). In this sense, the book is also a very curious object that complicates established production, distribution, and reception practices. First, the material aspects of the book – especially the tension between the use of photographic images and formal comics conventions – already

places it in a challenging border zone between formats. This ambiguous status is also evident in the definition published on Spottorno's website, in which the book is described as something "halfway between a photobook and a graphic novel" (Spottorno n.d., n.pag.).

Moreover, the book has been circulated in various fields, which guides the reading expectations and shapes how this object will be recognized, read, and classified. Depending on the institutional field in which it was released, *La Grieta* has been labeled as a "photo book," a "photo novel," a "photo comic," and a "photojournalism essay." The work has circulated and won multiple prizes in very different domains, from more traditional journalistic vehicles (like the prestigious *World Press Photo*) to comics institutions (it obtained the Prix Atomium de la BD reportage) and more artistic spaces (it won a Juror's Special Mention in the Aperture PhotoBook Awards, from a photography magazine). While the journalistic field will generally reward the quest for authenticity and spectacular, extraordinary events, contemporary photography magazines tend to call attention to its aesthetic features. Furthermore, the photobook category stands for another cultural object with its own constraints and set of reading expectations. In any case, regarding the editorial frames of circulation, *La Grieta* is published by publishing houses known for releasing comics in the editorial market: Astiberri (Spain), Gallimard Bande Dessinée (France), Avant Verlag (Germany), and Add (Italy).

Paratexts are also decisive elements that offer visual cues to help the reader to frame the book as a documentary, awakening a set of reading expectations (Genette 1997). The cover of *La Grieta* (see Figure 1) already evokes an implicit genre indication (Schmid 2021, 72): A rescued girl looks at us readers reminding us of canonical photojournalistic portraits (Nijdam 2020). Furthermore, a round sticker placed at the bottom of the cover announces a World Press Photo award in 2015, a sign of cultural prestige and a marker of journalistic belonging.

Another critical point is the temporality involved in this process. The series was not originally planned to appear as a comic, which means the images were not explicitly conceived to fit that format. Spottorno received a grant from the BBVA Foundation for a long-term project, during which he has curated and edited photos in this book format after these three years. So, instead of pictures published in the heat of the moment (and journalism, as we keep being reminded, is connected to the present tense and is close to a certain sense of urgency), here he had time to look back and organize, contextualize these macro events, challenging the rhythms of everyday journalism. In the following sections, I will look at this peculiar work from the perspective of very well-known formal constraints, which are typical of comics storytelling, and examine how they can be connected to the concept of archives: First, I will address the tension between linearity and tabularity, then the notion of graphiation, and finally the relation between image and text.



Figure 1: The cover of *La Grieta* (Spottorno and Abril 2016, cover page).

Boxing Documents in Containers

One of the most central features for thinking of archives and comics is the co-presence of images occupying the same space, but at the same time arranged in sequence. In other words, the tension between linear and tabular (Fresnault-Deruelle 1976), between sequential and synoptical readings of these materials. The comics page offers a way to slow down the flux of images, organize, order,

propose connections within intertwining page layout (*mise en page*) and panel breakdowns (Hatfield 2005).

Instead of following an archival logic of organizing historical materials in a chronological sequence of consecutive accumulated events, or in the form of lists, inventories, and collections, the use of the page layout can propose other logical connections plotting the configuration of events, modulating tension and shaping expectations, guiding the reader. The coexistence of multiple pictures arranged sequentially will provide the opportunity of a double reading – always both sequential and synoptical. Panels are never read in their isolated form, but in interaction with surrounding panels displayed in the layout, in what Groensteen (1999) calls *iconic solidarity*. Although such tension is not exclusive of comics, the reading habits of the comics page layout are so firmly rooted that it serves as a frame to comment on other formats, such as particular works of sequential photography:

Les images d'une séquence peuvent être placées sur une page les unes à côté des autres, ou encore disposées de manière tabulaire. L'observateur possède une conscience globale de la page. Son oeil peut vagabonder d'un cliché à l'autre à la vitesse qui lui convient. [. . .] Le spectateur calque ainsi sa conduite sur les habitudes de lecture du texte écrit ou de la bande dessinée.

[Images in a sequence can be placed on a page next to each other, or they can be arranged in a tabular fashion. The observer has a global awareness of the page. His eye can wander from shot to shot at any speed that suits it. [. . .] The spectator thus traces his behavior on the reading habits of the written text or the comic strip.] (Méaux 1997, 78)

The idea of boxing documents in containers finds resonance in the panel distribution of the comics page and the frontiers and panel borders in the process of worldmaking, not unlike what happens with the comics grid. It is possible to see panels as containers, following an archival logic of organizing and juxtaposing historical materials in a chronological sequence of consecutive accumulated events or in the form of lists, inventories, and collections.

This is the case with a double-page spread from *La Grieta*, for instance. We see a collection of objects found on the beach, the remains of shipwrecks from migrants, affected by time and destruction. Here, the panels almost work as archival containers – it is not a linear sequential logic that is at play, but an inventory logic. The absence of text also helps to highlight the coexistence of these objects and reinforces their potential connections.

Nevertheless, the use of the page layout can also, at the same time, propose other logical connections plotting the configuration of events and modulating narrative tension. For example, one strategy that enables a series of images to be read as a sequence is the homogeneity provided by the recurrence of its

characters and setting. That is what allows events to be read as change over time (Méaux 1997). Another strategy used in *La Grieta* is zooming in and out the scene, framing the same settings from varying distances. Page 100 shows, for example, an open shot, progressively closing to human portraits. In many cases, though, we are left with long sequences of different photographic essays with a weak sense of plotting.

Disguising Photographs as Drawings

A second dimension that deserves attention is the graphic style, a subject that has been widely explored by Phillippe Marion (1993). Marion introduces the concept of the *graphiateur* [graphiator] to discuss instances of graphic enunciation, conceived in degrees that range from a “human” calligraphic or manuscript trace to a trace produced by a machine. On the one hand, we could find an unstable, ratty line that denounces the presence of a manual gesture. On the other hand, we might encounter a regular trace that would presumably have less human interference, such as in a typewriter or a camera.

This discussion can further nuance the old debate about drawn opacity versus photographic transparency in our particular case. This approach may be helpful to shift the problem of indexicality from photography to the materiality of the archive. First, the intimate relation between photography and documentary practices results from a belief system that grants the status of visual proof to technical images. However, in the light of a skeptical age, when photography seems to abuse our credulity (Lavoie 2017), graphic truth-telling is considered an alternative in a thriving genre of documentary comics (Mickwitz 2016, 3) in which the testimonial quality of drawings, alluding to their own making, is considered more potent than the photographic. Given such skepticism of the photographic image, the wide use of photography in comics should not be seen as a simple matter of authenticity, but as fulfilling a narrative function, as a way to “get the business of storytelling done” (Pedri, 2015, 2):

Documentary (as an adjective and a noun) is about the presentation of evidence. In its succession of full frames, comics call attention to themselves, specifically, as evidence. Comics make a reader access the unfolding of evidence in the movement of its basic grammar by aggregating and accumulating frames of information. (Chute 2016, 2)

Second, in the case of archives, traditionally oriented towards the past, it would be fruitful to think of indexicality in terms of its material residual traces – the marks and scratches we find are not necessarily left by a recognizable *sujet graphiateur* [graphiator subject], but are shaped by the passage of time. This enduring

aspect of physical handling might intensify the effect of authenticity. In the visual materiality of the archives, authenticity does not lie in the supposed photographic indexicality. However, it can appear in the form of visual marks of physical duration, such as traces left by the handling of photographs.

When we look at *La Grieta*, the first thing that calls our attention is its relationship between photographs and drawings. Here we are neither dealing with drawn photographs (as in the famous examples of Spiegelman's *Maus* [1980] and Bechdel's *Fun Home* [2006]) nor with a combination of two medial formats on the same page (as in the combination of drawings and photographs in Guibert's *Le Photographie*). What happens is that these mechanically produced images are digitally altered in post-production in an attempt to make them look like drawings, maybe to disguise these photographic traces from their technical genesis. There are several strategies involved here: the use of solid contrast highlights the contours and efface details of the surface, the level of grain is increased, and a pastel color palette combines different images in a homogeneous tone. Spottorno also flattens differences in shadow and light, removing details and revealing more schematic shapes.

Beyond the usual corrective adjustments used in photojournalism practices, these dramatic changes fulfil several roles. First, they make the page layouts more cohesive, contributing to the sensation of consistent world-building. Second, these modifications also make the pages more readable by removing details and revealing schematic shapes. Yet, the main reason for interfering, according to Spottorno, is that "photography is way too concrete, too real" (2016, n.pag.). Instead of employing a realistic style, Spottorno disguises photographs as drawings in order to add another tone to the story. Furthermore, there is an attempt to create distance from melodramatic photonovels, which reveals a particular prejudice towards the format (Baetens 2019a). Spottorno also seems worried about the effects of photographic realism and, as a reaction, deliberately tries to approximate his book to the experience of reading comics.

El material gráfico era limitado, ya que si nos faltaba una foto no podíamos sustituirla por nada. Pero conseguimos encontrar un método para enlazar las historias: no hemos hecho un guión, sino un diario siguiendo los acontecimientos como acontecieron. No quería utilizar fotografía pura porque es demasiado concreta, demasiado real, te lleva al mundo de la revista o, peor aún, al de la fotonovela, y no quiero que se asocie a esto. Quiero que el lector no interprete, y para eso hay que transformar la foto. Aún siendo fotos con este efecto pierden ese carácter realista de la fotografía directa, y al hacerlo como una ilustración entras más en la idea de que estás leyendo un comic.

[The graphic material was limited, since if we were missing a photo we could not replace it with anything. But we managed to find a method to link the stories: We have not made a script, but a diary following the events as they happened. I did not want to use pure

photography because it is too concrete, too real, it takes you into the world of the magazine or, worse still, that of the photonovel, and I don't want it to be associated with this. I want the reader not to interpret, and for that you have to transform the photo. Even though they are photos with this effect, they lose that realistic character of direct photography, and by doing it as an illustration you get more into the idea that you are reading a comic.] (Spottorno and Abril, quoted in Martin 2016, n.pag.)

What is rather intriguing in this movement is that, although the pictures are graphically altered to tone down the photographic texture, the authors still stress the claim of photographic evidence and authenticity in an acknowledgment placed at the bottom of the last page that explains that all the events represented in the book took place and that no element has been added or removed, clarifying which aspects were digitally altered (colors, horizon, optical distortions, etc.) and which were not. According to the description in the press release, “the end result is not a story based on actual events: these are actual events” (Astiberri 2016, n.pag.).

Narrating the Click

A third aspect that needs to be addressed is the convergence between photography and other media, manifested, for example, in the tension between showing and telling, image and text. I will rely on the concept of segmentivity, developed by Brian McHale (2010) to talk about narrative poetry and applied to comics as an analytical tool by Steven Surdiacourt (2015). The notion of segmentivity is helpful to understand how we dismember texts to modulate the pace and distribute information on the comics page. Furthermore, text fragmentation helps organize the pages in a modular structure, assembling images in a maze of possible connections, bringing potential meanings to several archives.

What is striking about *La Grieta* is that all text is structured as a field journal and then fragmented into several blocks across panels and pages, pacing the reading, breaking down the flow into chunks, imposing a wandering rhythm along with the images. However, the text of this field journal works independently from the images, which assume a more illustrative function anchored by the text – instead of being integrated in a more interdependent relation.

Another tricky point here is the complicated metatextuality found in *La Grieta*, something typical of documentary graphic narratives that are frequently occupied with representing the fact-finding process (Schmid 2021, 20). We reconstruct Spottorno and Abril's journey through the perspective of a field journal. What moves us forward in the narrative is not necessarily the immigration

crisis, but the hunt for these pictures, the journalistic missions, and challenges after which specific images are presented as trophies. Their value depends on the level of contravention and risk involved in the photographic act, which breaks the transparency pact. This becomes clear, for example, when Spottorno and Abril are narrating the difficulties in their journey to enter the European Union in a car rented in Turkey. The caption calls attention to the clandestine action of taking a picture of the border post – resulting in an image of that building that occupies the entire page.

In the end, we are left with this strange disconnect between what we see and what we read, in an ambiguous game of concealment and revelation, opacity and transparency. While the photographic qualities are concealed and disguised as drawings, the text is often more concerned with calling attention to the photographic process itself and disclosing to the readers the investigative hunt for the forbidden and unique click.

Closing Remarks

In the previous pages, I've tried to look at the affordances and complexities of distributed intermedial agency in *La Grieta*, especially with regard to how it uses photographs that were remediated in a comic book. My aim here was to analyze *La Grieta* using a set of concepts and tools typically found in comics studies, and to see how the book explores the potentialities of the medium and provides an opportunity to exercise agency over photographic archives. *La Grieta* is an intriguing work that addresses the subject of immigration and the tensions of borders and frontiers. Still, at the same time, it can become a curious point of departure to discuss the issue of these migrating photographs and the semiotic, institutional, and technological tensions and cracks that appear when we cross medial borders.

Placed in these confusing and malleable border zones, in between formats and contexts of circulation, *La Grieta* highlights the retroactive component of comics, slowing down the flux of images and adjusting the fast temporalities of journalism. It works inside the frames of corporate media, but it also transitions to areas outside of that realm. In the end, despite the rich experience and challenging attempt to transform a massive archive and slow down the flow, the process of remediation reveals many underexplored comics potentialities as well as a certain tendency to replicate values and conventions already present in journalism circles. Considered as a transmedial journalistic experiment that brings “more of the same” (Baetens 2019a, 90) or an “awkward mobilization of

the comics medium” (Nijdam 2020, n.pag.), *La Grieta* is, still, a fascinating, unique book that allows us to better understand the limits of and tensions between photojournalism and documentary comics.

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