

On the narrative potential of photobooks: an analysis of Alec Soth's *Niagara's* book

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ABSTRACT

Visual narratives have a long history in the context of human cultural artifacts. In any sequence of images, the juxtaposition of visual signs gives rise to narrative potential. The narrative qualities of photographic images have been explored since its early days through the medium of the book. Borrowing the book artifact from literature, photography has adapted it for its own purposes. Such appropriation invites an examination of the strategies that are employed in photobooks to promote the emergence of narratives. Drawing upon the field of Narrative Studies and the concepts of *storyworld* and *worldmaking*, this paper investigates the narrative construction in the photobook *Niagara* (2006), produced by photographer Alec Soth. The paper demonstrates that certain strategies used in literary texts are analogous to the photobook space. In conclusion, I argue that photobooks are cultural objects that offer invaluable narrative possibilities, especially because they afford agency for the reader's/viewer's worldmaking.

KEYWORDS

narrative; photography; photobook; storyworld; worldmaking.

RESUMO

As narrativas visuais têm um lugar importante na história dos artefactos culturais humanos. Numa sequência de imagens, a justaposição de signos visuais oferece um potencial narrativo. As qualidades narrativas das imagens fotográficas foram exploradas desde seus princípios através do livro como mídia. Ao apropriar-se do livro como artefacto originário da literatura, a fotografia o adaptou para seus próprios fins. Tal apropriação levanta a questão de quais estratégias são empregadas nos fotolivros para fazer as histórias surgirem. A partir do campo dos Estudos Narrativos e dos conceitos de *storyworld* e *worldmaking*, este artigo investiga a construção narrativa no fotolivre *Niagara* (2006), produzido pelo fotógrafo Alec Soth. Nosso estudo demonstra que certas estratégias utilizadas em textos literários são análogas ao espaço do fotolivre. Concluindo, argumento que o fotolivre é um objeto cultural portador de possibilidades narrativas inestimáveis, especialmente porque proporciona liberdade ao leitor/espectador para a prática de *worldmaking*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

narrativa; fotografia; fotolivre; storyworld; worldmaking.

I. INTRODUCTION

Narratives have long been a part of the history of visual artifacts created by humans. From cave paintings to Instagram's stories, each new visual medium brings a range of new possibilities for developing narratives. Naturally, such a statement applies to photography. Whenever two photographs are placed in sequence, the juxtaposition of visual signs creates a relation between them. Be it a chronological relation, as in an old family photo album, or a causal one, as in a photographic storyboard, the association of static images can produce narrative meaning. However, the effectiveness of the narration will depend on several elements, including the author's intentions and the beholder's cultural knowledge.

This paper aims to analyze the narrative strategies used in photographic books in light of Narrative Studies. From its inception, the photographic medium has found in the book artifact a rich field of exploration for its narrative capabilities. In this device, the static photographic images have encountered a particular kind of time. In a book containing photographs, temporality is elicited by the pace at which one turns the pages, by the order in which one reads, and by the relation between the images displayed. Since photography has borrowed the book artifact from literature and adapted it for its own purposes, such appropriation invites an examination of the strategies that photography books employ to favor the emergence of narratives. In a time when the term *storytelling* has become so overused as to become an empty trope for *visual storytelling*, this article aims to underscore the relevance of narrative studies for photobooks. The distinction between books that contain photographs and photobooks is further explored in the article.

If certain literary writers use photographs as a source of inspiration to expand their narrative capacities (e.g. André Breton, W.G. Sebald¹), then in which ways do photography books employ literary narrative strategies to expand their own? I will propose some answers by drawing upon concepts of storyworld and worldmaking as developed by Bruner (2010), Ryan (2007, 2014) and Goodman (1978). These narrative strategies will be employed to

¹ See André Breton's *Nadja* (1964) and W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2011).

analyze our case study, the photobook² *Niagara* (2006), produced by photographer Alec Soth.

II. THE PHOTOBOOK AS AN AUTONOMOUS MEDIUM

From its very beginnings, photography has found in the book artifact a suitable technological and cultural medium to develop its potential for conveying meaning. Insofar as a network of venues to display photographs (such as galleries and museums) was inexistent during the early days of photography, and with original prints being precious and expensive objects, the book was a natural solution for circulating printed pictures. Nonetheless, the production costs of the earliest photobooks remained high, since they were produced on a very small scale with original images that were carefully pasted in by hand. Considered as one of the first photographic books, William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* was published as a part-work between 1844 and 1846.³ The original prints were followed by commentaries and the book helped to define photography, not only as picture-making but also as a methodology for organizing information, and as visual medium carrying a strong narrative capacity (Parr and Badger, 2004).

Photo-publishing finally became available for a mass market with the development of the halftone print block, which allowed for the expansion of illustrated publications. From the 1920's onwards, photobooks became "an essential tool for the documentary movement in the USA, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union" (Parr and Badger 2004: 10), and were also used for information and propaganda. In the same period, photographers started to work together with designers and typographers. Looking for new ways to publish printed photography, these professionals explored the potential of graphic forms, page format, lines, and texts within the book space.

This short historical note underscores the importance of the book as a multilayered medium for photography. As a mode of production, it has afforded a singular way of displaying visual information and of building visual narratives. Its technical features have shaped a narrative format that determines how visual stories are perceived. Consequently, an understanding of its specificities can shed light on the medium's narrative potentials and limits.

2 The photography books will be called *photobooks* in this article for two reasons. Firstly, it is the most common and widespread denomination for the kind of work we will analyze; secondly, as we will see, it is distinctive from the broader definition of photography book.

3 Some historians consider Anna Atkins's *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* (published in 1843) as the first photobook. Divergences to considering this work as the inaugural photobook arise from the fact that Atkins used the cyanotype process to make photograms by direct contact with seaweeds, rather than using printed images from a camera to compose her work.

Marie-Laure Ryan proposes that media are defined by three different categories. Firstly, the *semiotic substance* covers the most extensive signs, such as image, sound, language, and movement. Thereafter, the *technical dimension* relates to the technical conditions each media requires to exist. For instance, photography is a technical mode of production and also provides its material support. Its semiotic substance is situated in the realm of images. Finally, Ryan considers the *cultural dimension* of the medium, which relates to the recognition of media as “forms of communication and the institutions, behaviors, and practices that support them” (2014: 30). Regarding the cultural dimension, books containing photographs circulate either as mass media products or as artistic objects, and often these features tend to blend. In photobooks, the artistic ambition and the mass medium aspect of photography are combined to compelling effect. Like literary writers, author-photographers use a mass medium to convey their subjective perception of the world. In this sense, the photobook can be considered as a mass media work of art.

Our interest is directed to the technical dimension, with the aim of investigating how the technology of the book shapes the way in which the visual narrative is elaborated by the author and perceived by the viewer. Thus, the semiotic substance will play a less important role,⁴ since we are more interested in the meaning that springs from an image sequence, rather than an examination of individual images as part of a codified symbolic system. However, it is still a relevant dimension, since the interpretation of each individual image leads to causal relations with the other images throughout the book.

Yet it is still necessary to better define our object from the technological perspective. Its obvious definition as “a book containing photographs” is clearly not sufficient to fully grasp its significance. Contrary to a publication which simply displays photographic images, a photobook implies a “multilayered mode of production”, encompassing technologies of both recording and transmission (Ryan, 2014: 29). On the one hand, there is an author recording images⁵ by means of photographic technology. On the other, there is the book as a technology of image transmission. According

4 Our ability to make sense of an image is dependent on our knowledge of what it represents. Correspondingly, a sequence of images in a book is a sequence of meanings. But the key implication for our study is that images are not like language, that is to say, they do not have an established and immutable sense like words. Rather than symbolic, they establish a mental representation of the world. I will come back to the concept of mental representation within narratives below.

5 The photographer is also the main responsible for decisions such as the editing and the agencing of images, which are fundamental operations to convey meaning in a photobook.

to Ryan, artist's books are an example of technologies that primarily transmit other media, but later evolved into "autonomous media of information or artistic expression" (30).

Further, the photographer-author does not work alone. Frequently, the conception of a photobook is made in concert with an editor, who collaborates with the author to convey meaning through the sequence of images. Moreover, a sequence of printed images in a book needs graphic and technical solutions. Photobooks are often elaborated in close cooperation with designers. Their role is to develop the formal and graphic aspects of the book in line with the conceptual idea of the work.

These remarks concerning the production process highlight the most fundamental aspect of photobooks, namely, the significance of images considered as a sequence, rather than individually. A photobook's basic structure is found in the ordering of the images that are displayed. As stated by Martin Parr and Gerry Badger in their *Photobook: A History*, the images' collective meaning is more relevant than their individual meaning. Images in photobooks "are placed to resonate with other images" (Parr and Badger, 2004: 6). The complete meaning of a work appears only in the book as a whole, which is very different from what one can grasp from a mere compilation of printed images. Furthermore, the photobook offers other elements – the spaces between images, blank pages, texts, graphic elements – all of which are equally responsible for making the photobook a singular object of its own.

III. DEFINING NARRATIVE IN CROSS-MEDIA PERSPECTIVE

The importance of narrative as a way of organizing subjective experiences appears to be essential for people, regardless of their cultures. As Jerome Bruner (2010) puts forward, narratives render social life possible and make imagination and experience more tangible. In the field of Narrative Studies, many theories and models attempt to define how narrative strategies are employed by literary texts. Our specific interest views these strategies as being analogous to other media spaces, especially to sequences of images as they are presented in photobooks.

The notion of time plays an essential role in narrative protocols. Indeed, the most elementary definition would be that narrative is the representation of a sequence of events through time. In like manner, stories emerge where there is a disruption in the natural order of things. The feeling of the story is triggered by this experience of disequilibrium. A disruption implies that significant changes in the habitual world were caused by external forces (Ryan, 2007). Consequently, the temporal dimension of narrative also

implies a relationship of causality between the different events unfolding in the story.

One can conceive of causality in literary works, but how would causality apply to a sequence of images in a photographic book? Obviously, the idea of a time span is prompted by the act of turning the pages, and the story's duration is comprised in the length of the book. This very basic operation may suggest causality between an image and its preceding or subsequent images. Agency is therefore essential, since the author seeks to convey causal relations between the images by carefully establishing the sequence in which they will be viewed. Thus, when it comes to the production of photobooks, the process of editing is one of the principal resources for creating relations between images and allowing visual narratives to emerge.

Editing a photobook is a highly subjective process and points to the *mental dimension* that conditions narratives. The mental dimension can be present via the account of personal experiences, where a character's emotions and motivations drive the story. According to Ryan (2007: 29), even non-fictional texts bear a mental dimension, on condition that the reader understands how the first-person narrator acts and reacts to the world. To that extent, the photobook appears as very receptive medium for hosting personal experiences. In certain subjective documentary works, the photographer resembles a first-person narrator depicting an immersive personal experience of the world. While subjective, such experience is closely connected to the real world as it exists "out there". The narrative emphasis is on the relation between the photographer and reality, and what that reality looks like after this ontological exchange. Finally, it is a matter of constructing realities via actions and reactions that are recorded by the camera, and which blur the limits between fiction and non-fiction.

IV. NARRATIVE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: STORYWORLD AND WORLDMAKING

We have seen so far that narratives and our conception of reality are closely connected, since the story format shapes our experience of the world. Undoubtedly, photography has the potential to describe things, but as isolated pieces of reality, pictures need to be connected to become a story. Connecting these pieces is a needful operation, so that perceptions of time, causality, and disruption can be accessed by viewer. The photobook therefore appears as a powerful multilayered medium for visual narratives, since it links different visual events of the world with the mental perspective of its author.

Studies in the field of multimedia narratology have mainly focused on the narrative potential of single images, and have often investigated images

from the European Oil Painting tradition (Speidel, 2013; Wolf, 2014). However, this approach may be considered reductive. Firstly, because images are seldom displayed alone. They exist within a cultural setting that participates in their assimilation and perception process. Classical oil paintings are commonly viewed inside a museum, where the institutional aspect plays an important cultural role in the interpretation of the images. Secondly, many of the examples that are put forward are historical and religious paintings depicting events well established in the collective memory. These paintings rarely offer the general beholder freedom for different interpretations. Despite bearing many details and rich descriptions, these objects are mostly used as examples of important historical events or symbolic religious representations.

On the other hand, image sequences can tell stories not because each image is a faithful description of the world, but because they display different fragments of reality that are also connected by each viewer's agency. In Narrative Studies, *storyworld*⁶ is the mental model of the story that is created when the reader articulates the elements in the plot. Conversely, in a photobook, the storyworld emerges once the author's intent in organizing the images in a certain way meets the viewer's capacity for weaving relationships between them.⁷ Therefore, storyworld allows a connection between the stories and the viewer's own perception of reality.

According to Jerome Bruner, the perception of reality lies between the physical-natural world and the human symbolic domain, with "reality" being grasped when our experiences and memories are organized into narratives (1991). In other words, he suggests that narrative operates as an instrument for framing reality and producing cultural knowledge. This amalgamation of nature and the symbolic allows not only access to the storyworld, but provides the tools for building new worlds that are only conceivable in each reader's mind. Philosopher Nelson Goodman (1978) refers to "ways of worldmaking" which are afforded by different ways of decoding the world. The concept of *worldmaking* asks even more for the reader/viewer's participation. It claims that the link between the author's intention and the viewer's perception is more far-reaching, and that there is more

6 According to Ryan, storyworld "is a dynamic model of evolving situations, and its representation in the recipient's mind is a simulation of the changes that are caused by the events of the plot. [...] *Storyworld* is a broader concept than *fictional world* because it covers both factual and fictional stories, meaning stories told as true of the real world and stories that create their own imaginary world, respectively" (2014: 33).

7 As Jerome Bruner warns, "intentional states never determine the course of events" (1991: 7). There is always some room for agency in narratives. The agency presupposes some freedom of choice, and this is even more evident in visual narratives with sequences of images.

ground for cognitive operations than in the concept of storyworld. Moreover, worldmaking bears a multimodal approach, connecting visual elements with language, and perception with the production of knowledge.

Indeed, in photobooks the range of interpretation is usually broad, without a definitive conclusion or single lesson to be taken from the story. To that extent, the importance of the viewer's background knowledge is considerable. Analogous to a visual reservoir, someone who has a more developed visual literacy will perceive more details, establish more connections and draw more suppositions, while looking at the images. That said, context sensitivity plays an important role in the process of worldmaking.

As regards reader agency, in photobooks there is a clear distinction between what images directly depict and what their meanings stand for in the context of the book. In other words, there is no right or wrong meaning, but rather a full range of subjective interpretations. Bruner (1991: 7) uses the term *hermeneutic composability* to signify the difference between what is expressed in the text and the *meaning* of the text. It is the human ability to process knowledge in an interpretative way that allows for an understanding of the story as an independent world in and of itself.

Inevitably, when it comes to images, words or sentences, it is how such elements are displayed that creates the possibility of their coexisting in a book. Since the putting together and pulling apart heterogeneous elements is also a strategy of worldmaking, the *composition* and *decomposition* of parts and members into subclasses or ensembles can create complex connections (Goodman, 1978). When images are associated in a coherent flow, many outcomes can arise. Judicious juxtapositions not only alter the reader's perception of each individual image, but can also inspire operations such as metaphoric transfers, emphasis created by repetitions, and conceptual links between different objects. In like manner, a sequence of images supports conceptual links between different or even incongruous objects.

These operations are made possible by the specific ways in which photographs can be used to build narratives. Taking advantage of image features such as colors, patterns, graphic elements, and forms, the author can build a narrative's own visual universe. In exceptional works, one can find in the sequence of images a true sense of rhythm, intricate plots, recall of complex emotional states, and even cunning ruptures along the sequence of images. Such strategies convey the photographer's subjective perception of reality and allow the viewer to engage with the visual narrative.

These strategies are possible owing not only to the properties of each image, but also to the book space itself. Ordering images in sequential pages is just one of the many arrangement strategies. Operations like grouping, isolating and repeating similar images are also afforded by the book space.

The total number of pages, the number of images per page, the vertical or horizontal orientation of the book, and even graphic and technical details like the margin space and the kind of paper used are equally relevant for worldmaking within the book.

Another way of worldmaking is *weighting*. According to Goodman, this relates to the different emphasis put on specific elements that constitute the world. Essentially, weighting draws on the fact that the different accents we put on distinct elements is one of the reasons why we perceive the world as meaningful. When Goodman states that “just as to stress all syllables is to stress none, so to take all classes as relevant kinds is to take none as such” (1978: 11), one can imagine the same principle being applied to a sequence of images in a photobook.

Interestingly, he uses an example of visual art to explain his concept, explaining that what makes us recognize the style of an eminent portrait painter are the differences in the aspects which are accentuated. He adds that accentuating certain aspects presupposes putting less emphasis on other elements present in our world of everyday seeing. The process is very similar to the way a photobook stimulates worldmaking. During the editing process, the inclusion of a number of ordinary pictures, poorer in visual information, can be a way to highlight stronger images. Similarly, the emphasis can be strengthened or weakened by choosing different size dimensions for images, or by displaying them in unequal positions in the pages of the book.

As a final topic in worldmaking, I would like to address the question of referentiality and truth, which seems to be fundamental to understanding visual narratives in photobooks. From the literary perspective, *referentiality* is often associated with realism in fiction. Bruner asserts that the “narrative ‘truth’ is judged by its verisimilitude rather than its verifiability” (1991: 13). Conversely, we can consider a sequence of images as real (indexical signs) but not necessarily true.⁸ Storyworlds elaborated with photographs will inevitably deal with the complex issue of truthfulness. As Goodman puts it, “truth, far from being a solemn and severe master, is a docile and obedient servant”. In literary texts, “metaphorical or allegorical truth may matter more” since a “false statement may be metaphorically true” (1978: 18). It is this change of referentiality that allows for the creation of new worlds and new forms of knowledge, which can be as complex as feelings or intuitions.

In this sense, pictures are mere statements – we are powerless to assert whether they are true or untrue. Goodman suggests that *showing* something

8 According to Ryan, “non-fictional stories are told as true of the real world, but they do not necessarily live up to this ideal. The storyteller can be lying, misinformed, or playing loosely with the facts. It is therefore necessary to distinguish the world as it is presented and shaped by a story from the world as it exists autonomously” (2014: 33).

is a purely referential function, whereas the idea of *rightness* is more properly applied to the organizing power that rules the whole system: “Rather than speak of pictures as true or false we might better speak of theories as right or wrong” (1978: 19). A Photobook plays with referentiality and truth, taking advantage of their multilayered medium to allow ways of worldmaking. When their referentiality fits with coherence and relevance within a system – within its *rightness* – we have virtually infinite and boundless ways of exploring the narrative potential offered by a sequence of images appearing in the pages of a book.

V. NIAGARA: FROM DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY TO STORYWORLD

The work of American photographer Alec Soth is closely affiliated to the tradition of the *documentary style*.⁹ Approaching the relation between narratives and metaphors,¹⁰ the modern mythologies of America have been a major topic of interest in his work. In 2005, he undertook a documentary project in the surroundings of Niagara Falls, a celebrated touristic destination on the border of the United States and Canada. Famous as a popular destination for people looking to get married or to spend their honeymoon, the city of Niagara Falls has traditionally been long considered by many Americans as the honeymoon capital. Drawing from his particular interest in this cultural tradition, he sought out stories of love and marriage, and produced a photographic body of images that has found its ideal setting in the photobook space. The book *Niagara* was first published in 2006 and consists of 104 pages in 28 x 32 cm format with a faux leather-bound hardback cover.

Before proceeding to examine the ways in which *Niagara* employs the notions of narrative, storyworld, and worldmaking, it is necessary to break down its image corpus. I have found six categories of images which seem to emerge from the book: 1. Architectural views of buildings, picturing stereotypical American motels and photographed at different times of day under varying light conditions (figure 1); 2. Interior views of these motels, showing beds, kitsch decoration, and other details of the spaces; 3. Portraits of cou-

⁹ *Documentary style* is a term coined by American photographer Walker Evans (1903–1975). It designates a combination of specific formal features (clear, neutral, frontal and systematized records), the serial working, and use of classical photographic genres (such as landscape, still life, portrait, and architectural). The *documentary style* is related to certain specific themes such as travel accounts and singular social microcosms. (Lugon, 2001).

¹⁰ Cf. Magnum Photos. n.d. “Alec Soth”. Accessed November 20, 2020. <https://www.magnumphotos.com/photographer/alec-soth/>

ples (some of them naked), individual portraits, and one group portrait (figures 4 and 5); 4. Landscape views of the Niagara Falls (figure 3); 5. “Still life” views of various objects, such as a photo album on a bed, a whisky glass on a table, or a wedding dress hanging from the ceiling (figure 2); and 6. Photographs of handwritten love letters, which are photographed with exactly the same frame, under the same homogeneous light, and which resemble a digital scan of the letters (figure 6).

Although categorizing these elements gives a correct overview of the image corpus, some images may fit into more than one category. Also, certain images could be arranged in subcategories or even “hidden” categories. (On page 41, for example, a picture depicts an interior view of a mirrored jacuzzi; looking carefully, one can notice the reflection of a naked man in a small portion of the frame and wonder: is this a self-portrait of the photographer?) For our purposes, it is paramount to understand how a sequence of images can suggest very singular storyworlds and offer a broad range of interpretations. This is achieved by the use of narrative strategies that create a particular “feeling of plot” in the overall work, as it is presented in the book’s pages.

In the book, the context of the story is meticulously described. Owing to the inherent qualities of documentary photography, the configuration of space is remarkably pictured in each photograph. The combination of architectural views of vernacular hotel buildings and images of the Niagara Falls creates a backdrop for the events that unfold. Interior pictures, objects, and additional details complete the rich depiction of the environment. Alec Soth works with a large-format camera, which produces high-fidelity images in terms of sharpness, colors, textures, and perspectives. The contextual information is further enhanced by Soth’s precise and methodological approach to photography, which brings an aesthetic uniformity to the different photographic genres. Objects, for instance, are photographed as if they were still lifes. With respect to portraits, the use of soft lighting and a medium contrast tone prevails throughout the series. The homogeneity of the corpus enhances the feeling of similitude between the images and encapsulates the viewer in a particular set.



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

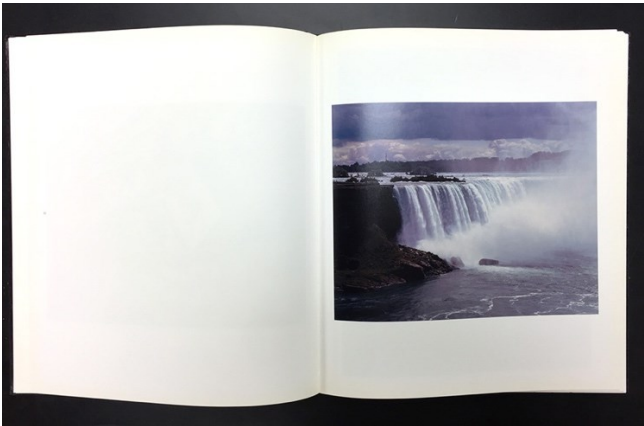


Figure 3.

As a classic documentary photography project, *Niagara* also features images of characters playing their own roles in a plot. They are represented by the portraits of strangers the photographer encountered. From images of people alone in the frame, dressed in wedding outfits and appearing absent-minded, to couples sharply facing the camera during an intimate moment, one can infer a wide range of emotional states from these characters. Some gaze directly into the camera, showing confidence and awareness of the photographer's presence. Others look as if they are uncomfortable or vulnerable. Pictures portraying naked couples, and which could be viewed as a subcategory within the portraits, bring the viewer into contact with a still more intimate space. In these images, the complicity emanating from the lovers' bodies seems to be put into perspective by the loneliness of some of the people portrayed alone.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

Pictures from other categories add further layers of contextualization and support the construction of the storyworld, in addition to providing tools for worldmaking. Soth uses a very efficient multimodal strategy in this regard. The pictures of handwritten letters – which are easily legible – offer another type of contextual information for the story. They are about love relationships, sometimes relating to their most ordinary aspect. Since the viewer can read these declarations of love and accounts of relationship troubles and reconciliation, the letters provide a dramatic core for the story. Soth asked people he met in Niagara Falls if they had kept a love letter he could use. Interestingly, one does not know which character wrote each letter, nor even if there is a correlation between the letters' authors and the people who are portrayed. What is important is how valuable this visual-verbal information is to forging the characters' role in the visual narrative. Adding images of handwritten texts to a sequence of images, the author challenges the visual information embedded in the photographs, asking one to look closely and imagine the underlying stories. The multimodal strategy invites the reader/viewer to search for what is not obvious in the photographs at first sight.

Another important narrative feature present in *Niagara* is the temporal perception of the story. The flow created by the configuration of the pages and the ordering of the images evokes a certain idea of time unfolding. At first glance, the changes in the daylight allow one to recognize morning, afternoon, and evening. But rather than a linear and logical progression of time and events, we experience small stories that seem to overlap each other, as if they were occurring simultaneously. This strategy is similar to that employed in postmodern literature¹¹ to convey multiple-perspective stories.

Although distinct from one another, *Niagara's* stories are not disconnected. Temporality also emerges from causal relations, however loose they might be. One may look at the empty rooms depicted in the photographs and imagine what happened there when the couples occupied the space. The objects depicted suggest actions and ways in which they might have been used. There are numerous details and objects throughout the book that suggest causality connecting people and places. They serve the storyworld, in the same way as detailed descriptions do in a novel or in an essay.

11 In postmodern narratives, the temporal structures are loose, and are not vital for the reader to understand the story. Focusing on the narrator's mental process, they result from a blend of subjective perception and representation of reality. For postmodern narratives, the objectivity of the facts is often less important than the mental dimension of the narrative. The way facts are described is more important than the content of those facts. Moreover, postmodern narratives offer viewing frames, which reflect isolated events. It affords the reader the impression of viewing diverse facts rather than the feeling of being told a sequence of connected events (Fludernik, 1993).

For the viewer, the storyworld which emerges from the narrative attributes of *Niagara* can stimulate personal memories and imagination. By contextualizing subjective experiences and making them more tangible, it provides room for worldmaking. Firstly, the process can take place through the interpretation of the insightful association of images proposed by the author. The connections between different images allow not only for causality but for a range of other relations as well. For example, the *composition* and *decomposition* of the parts is present in the ordering and organization of different visual categories. In the book these operations create *metaphorical transfers* such as periodicity, which denotes repetition or unpredictability of events (Goodman, 1978). Since the act of worldmaking demands an active participation from the reader/viewer, the metaphorical transfers can only make sense within the viewer's subjective interpretation.

Initially, the strategy of weighting some images more than others seems to be neglected in Alec Soth's book. All the images have the same size on the book's pages and are displayed in the same position in the book's layout. However, he emphasizes certain categories at the expense of others. Portraits and architectural pictures predominate throughout the book (23 out of 39 images), while pictures of "still life" objects appear only six times. This selection develops the strong spatial feeling that permeates the work, connecting the human characters with the external background.

As mentioned above, the *composition* and *decomposition* of elements might result in many complex connections. For instance, identification with characters in the book may occur when one connects the pictures of the letters to the portraits. Metaphors of love can be drawn from the banality of the objects denoting affection, or from the absolute magnificence of the Niagara Falls. The possibilities are seemingly endless, and each viewer is free to have their own perception. By stimulating the viewer to the exercise of interpretation, the author achieves another essential property of worldmaking, namely, the production of knowledge.¹²

12 The production of knowledge is also supported by captions for each image and the reproduction of fieldwork notes at the end of the book. However, while these do afford other narrative elements, they do not restrict the viewer's interpretation of the images.

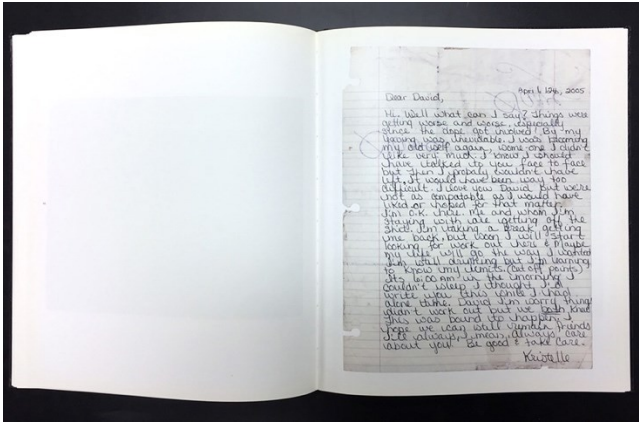


Figure 6.

With images alternating between vivid moments and quiet breaks throughout the book, every decision is responsible for the emotional rhythm of the story. The awareness of the wide range of possibilities affords the viewer access to emotional states that can be used to construct a plot wherein (almost) everything can fit. But if an accurate documentary work such as Alec Soth's *Niagara* pushes the viewer to construct a rich imaginative and emotional universe, how then can we still assert that this reality – so straightforwardly depicted – is close to truth? I do not have the answer for the question, but I suggest that the paradox is precisely the main strength of the work as a form of worldmaking. In an artful mix of sense and referentiality, the photobook can co-opt elements from the real world in order to create emotional states that are akin to fictional depictions.

VI. CONCLUSION

As discussed above, the perspectives of Narrative Studies suggest that photobooks are a privileged space for storyworlds and for “ways of worldmaking”. In our brief historical overview, we saw that photobooks have always been a promising medium for accessing storyworlds. In our analysis of Alec Soth's *Niagara*, we considered the work to be a “first-person” narrative, and in so doing acknowledged its potential to generate an independent storyworld. When *photographer-narrators* display their own subjective perspective of a given reality, they become an integral part of storyworld. So too the objects and other characters depicted throughout the book. As a tangible character in his book, Alec Soth blurs the lines between fictional and non-fictional accounts.

Indeed, in *Niagara* one feels there is a photographer “behind” the images. In other words, the *documentary intention* is made clear for the viewer from the outset. Regardless of whether photographs are staged or not, the documentary aspect seems to be inherent to photography as a medium. However, as we become caught up in the story, we may forget the presence of the photographer and feel that what we perceive is a fictional account. Actually, it is the viewers who create their own storyworlds, which are subtly connected to the documentary reality of the photographs. It is precisely within this negotiation – between the author’s personal intention and the external framework of reference – that the documentary, as a subjective photographic practice, can promote the emergence of storyworlds.

Finally, rather than discussing whether or not these photographic narratives refer to reality, we should consider the narrative as a world in itself, and the viewers as *worldmakers*. What is required of the viewer is imagination. Here, imagination stands for making an effort to approach the concept of storyworld, and requires that the beholder experience the medium’s language (Ryan, 2014).

Our findings suggest a wide array of narrative possibilities afforded by the photobook as a multilayered medium, and therefore contribute to narrative studies of multimodal objects involving images and words. Despite their narrative potential as cultural objects, the dissemination of photobooks is nevertheless still very restricted. Unlike literary works, their circulation is limited to specialists in the field, such as photographers, artists, and collectors.

One way to overcome this obstacle is to promote photobooks not only as illustrated books, but as cultural objects that carry various narrative possibilities and afford agency for the reader’s/viewer’s worldmaking. To that extent, it is necessary to challenge conventional factual narratives by favoring cultural objects where storyworlds can emerge through the beholder’s active participation. By offering viewers the experience of a flow of static images that carry variable temporalities, conceptual spaces, and different layers of meaning, photobooks – serving as an independent medium of representation – can turn those visual experiences into cultural knowledge.

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