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The photo-novel, a minor medium?

by Jan Baetens



The strength of prejudice in an era of ‘anything goes’

An essential characteristic of our postmodern times is a broadminded critical nature which can renounce Grand Theories, the classical canon, the privileged opinion, and genre hierarchies (not just the distinction between high and low but also that between culture and commerce). This is just in theory, for in practice value judgments and the spirit of distinction have only been reshaped in new forms. Yet despite the (deceiving) impression that anything goes and that issues of taste no longer matter, many cultural practices continue to be burdened by prejudice and intolerance. Such is the case with novelisation, the ‘reverse adaptation’ that converts an original film or scenario into a novel.¹

Countless testimonies aspire to demonstrate the scandalous character of this practice, as evidenced by confessions of novelisation authors such as Ann C. Crispin, who notes, ‘Many times I’ve heard people – well-known writers in the field, Nebula winners, Hugo winners – sit there and brag about having done porn, confession stories, you-name-it, any kind of sleazy keep-the-bread-on-the-table writing, and in the same breath they will put down someone who has written a novelization of a Star Trek book.’² Even worse is the situation of the photo-novel. Its cultural and critical status is often described in terms of ‘moving yet traumatizing stupidity’.³

For most scholars the photo-novel is an easy victim, all the more vulnerable since it does not have many voices taking up its defense. It is said that a photo-novel is so stupid, so poor, and so repetitive that there can be only one possible reaction: ignore it. One may agree that there are good reasons to bypass this medium: it can be quite meager visually (often a mechanic succession of talking heads); it can be very narrow thematically (a set of variations on the romantic and eternal love between two people that fate would keep apart); from an ideological point of view it is often highly suspect, given its unconditional defense of outdated values (such as the inferior position of women); and the medium has not changed since its origins in 1947. However, such a categorisation is unreliable. It is necessary to have a closer look at what the photo-novel really is in order to notice that it raises a lot of fascinating questions which are not possible to examine through the lens of other media such as photography, cinema, or comic strips. The photo-novel is

a medium unto itself – not simply a sequence of pictures, a book version of what might have also been a film, or a comic strip with photographs – and as such it has something to teach us.

The photo-novel as medium

Allow me to begin with a theoretical adjustment as well as some basic knowledge on the history of the photo-novel, not just because there is something like a history of it but also because this history can only be understood in relation to the notion of a medium, which is much broader than that of a genre. Genre specifications are unsatisfactory for another reason: it is not true that all photo-novels are variations on one single genre mold – the melodrama. This is a historical simplification that the subsequent analysis will attempt to undo.

Along with the philosopher Stanley Cavell, I would like to argue that a medium exists in an apparent paradox – both something specific and something that constantly changes. By the first element of specificity I mean something that is defined by a special and almost automatic relationship between a host medium, a certain type of sign, and certain content. These are the three central domains that Cavell foregrounds in his medium theory – not by adding them together but by studying the mutual interaction between host medium, sign type, and content. In such an approach the medium is then defined in terms of its ‘automatism’, i.e. the elective affinity that joins together these three aspects. The second element, which Cavell emphasises in order to discard any essentialist approach of medium specificity, refers to the fact that the automatism of a medium is never defined conclusively. It may change due to evolutions or transformations at the level of the host medium, the sign type, or the content. These changes, provided they are more than just superficial technical upgrades or re-mediations, may induce new or different forms of automatisms.⁴

This medium theory is unreservedly relevant for the study of the photo-novel, both synchronically and diachronically, for it offers a matrix in which to analyse in an open, critical way the history of the genre as a permanent struggle to find the perfect (and of course utopian, untraceable, perhaps non-existing) automatism. Regarding the history of the photo-novel as I will sketch it in the following paragraphs, I will insist on the way in which the medium has always had to reinvent a kind of ideal balance between host medium, sign, and content.

The first photo-novels appear in Italy in 1947 and are the result of a very complex example of media history (of which recent scholarship on illustrated magazines and film in print has been providing new insights) as well as media hybridisation – the notion of intermediality is too weak to adequately cover the merger of media that produced the photo-novel as a totally new automatism. Three other media converge in the emergence of the photo-novel: the film-novel, a photo-tex-

tual hybrid that offered a relatively faithful representation of an existing movie (the formats and formulas of the film-novel are so divergent that many scholars have difficulties in establishing the exact frontiers of the medium); comic strips, another photo-textual hybrid form based on an original story or scenario (although in certain cases they may reproduce a film, and comics then become a form of drawn novelisation); the so-called drawn novel, a very singular and short-lived kind of comic strip born after the Second World War that pretended to be a film-novel with drawings instead of pictures (see Fig. 1). However, these drawn novels (hugely successful from 1945-1950, after which they all but disappeared) were not based on an existing movie or movie script. What they did offer instead was an almost perfect copy of the characters, situations, and storylines of the Hollywood cinema that returned to Europe after a five-year interruption due to the war. These works symbolised the hope for a new and better life in the eyes of the fatigued population. In that sense, the photo-novel can be called the photographic ‘translation’ or ‘update’ of the drawn novel, a mixture between film-novel and comic strip.



Fig. 1: *Anime Incatenate*, by M. Dukey and W. Symes, Grand Hotel, No. 1, 1947 (drawn novel; opening page)

The photo-novel produces something new, more specifically, a new automatism. In Cavell’s line of thinking, without such an innovation there would be no reason to consider the photo-novel something beyond the mere re-purposing of existing

schemes. The photo-novel chooses a certain host medium: the weekly magazine, which implies a certain format, a certain kind of paper, a certain kind of publication rhythm (the photo-novel is an example of periodical literature; most photo-novels are not released as complete novels but rather follow the installment format), as well as a certain kind of serialisation. As is the case with many other kinds of industrial literature, photo-novels do not escape the necessity of exploiting a successful idea or storyline in larger series, although the pressure to re-use the same character in various adventures is curiously absent. Here, the ‘automatising’ influence of its specific content becomes very blatant. Since the major theme of the photo-novel is the discovery of true love, the systematic rediscovery of the same feeling and experience by the same protagonist would rapidly fall prey to parody – and of course it is not by chance that most photo-novelistic series are marked by spoofs.



Fig. 2: *Pane, amore...*, Titanus, ‘Grandi Successi dello Schermo’ series, 1956, p. 43 (photo-novel version of the 1955 film by Dino Risi, produced by Titanus).⁵

The photo-novel also chooses a specific kind of sign; not only photographs, but photographs made according to a certain aesthetic, based on the eroticism of the face (both male and female) and of the body (mainly female). In addition, the medium attempts to elaborate models of page layout that do not simply imitate the available models of both comic strips and drawn novels. Contrary to these two media (which in these years often experimented with unconventional layouts that

transgress the classic grid composed by the horizontal and vertical weaving of linear and rectangular panels and strips), the photo-novel opts for a regressive format. After initial efforts to copy the rounded forms of some comic strips and drawn novel panels and the tabular composition principles of their layouts (which were intended to be read as a whole as much as to be passed through in a more linear mode), the photo-novel very rapidly opts for a more sober palette. This is mostly in order to avoid any distraction from the most visible parameter of its novelty – namely the use of photographs, and the capacity to exploit the seductive nature of glamour photography in original narrative contexts (see Fig. 2).

Finally, the photo-novel selects a certain kind of story to link to: the melodrama. As clearly demonstrated by Peter Brooks in his seminal study, the melodrama is less a genre than a ‘mode’ and its different forms are definitely cross- or trans-medial (although issues of mediality do play a key role in the construction and the development of the genre); its core themes are ‘innocence persecuted’ and also ‘virtue made visible’. A melodrama is the translation of previous reflections on good and evil in psychological terms (good and evil are no longer absolute categories, they only exist as feelings experienced by good and evil characters) and the aim of the melodramatic plot is to make these feelings – more specifically, the difference between the honesty of the virtuous hero or heroine and the wickedness of the villain – literally visible, first on stage and then in the many other variations on the same basic theme in other media.

In the case of the photo-novel, which continues the abandoned melodramatic tradition that passed from the boulevard theater (where it was to be discarded by the return of the text theater) to the so-called primitive cinema (where it was to be abandoned in favor of the more realist acting style that accompanied the narrative turn of the film industry), the reuse of melodrama seems to be both naive and unabashed, often on the verge of crude plagiarism. This can be seen, for instance, in the oriental variant of the early photo-novel in which the influence of Rudolph Valentino’s star power is still very much present. At the same time however, the medium sets the melodrama in a contemporary and usually urban setting. Under the influence of postwar neorealism the photo-novel will abandon this exoticism, as is demonstrated by Federico Fellini’s *The White Sheik* (1952), a film that takes the photo-novel craze in Italy as its theme while also parodying the exotic and escapist tendencies of some of its early attempts.

The photo-novel becomes a real independent medium very quickly, with a unique combination of host medium, sign type, and content. This combination is different from the one that can be found in the film-novel, comic strips, and the drawn novel, and it becomes so strong and successful that it manages to outstrip all other media within the field of women’s magazines – a domain of intense creative innovation in the immediate post-war period. After having offered a diverse mixture of film-novels, comic strips, and drawn novels, these magazines soon

shifted to a new format in which the photo-novel became the dominant medium (if not the only one to remain within the new publications for women that appeared after the war).

The necessity of change as the flip side of success

In the context of mass culture this success is also a danger, for it prevents the medium from doing what it must in order to survive in the jungle of the culture industry. It is not enough to be popular and successful – one must also change and innovate on a permanent basis. This is what the photo-novel tried to do when it established its position, which was soon challenged by a new player in the market: television.

What is being questioned through the many challenges that the photo-novel has had to face is less the idea of the medium itself and more the idea of the automatism that determined its production and reception at a certain moment in time. Of course, it is not possible to present here a detailed overview of the many changes that have modified the photo-novelistic automatism since its beginnings; some well-chosen examples can highlight the specific interaction between host medium, sign type, and the content that defines Cavell's medium theory. One of the advantages of such an approach is to offer a more nuanced vision of the photo-novel's history, which cannot be reduced to a simple chain of action-reaction schemes and events but which is to be seen as obeying less linear and mechanic structures and developments. A medium does not change because this or that aspect of its automatism is put under pressure but rather because the whole automatism is being redefined.

One change has to do with a medium's content. In the case of the photo-novel this change has been manifest since the mid-1950s, when the medium actually absorbed or assimilated the structures of the film-novel. The presentation of the film-novel shifted radically to that of the photo-novel, whose host medium and visual language it began to obey. The influence of the dominating structure of the photo-novel was so strong that the content of the film in question was even undergoing changes aimed at bringing it closer to the photo-novel's basic mode of the melodrama. In exchange, the photo-novel used the sub-type of the film-novel to find an answer to the rapidly growing critiques of its own artificial and anachronistic content (this was the conceit of *The White Sheik*: the alienation of the female reader, brainwashed by the exotic dream world of the first photo-novels). More and more photo-novels tended to be 'photo-novelised' versions of the former film-novel. Given the craving for realism in European cinema of these years, the incorporation of the film-novel's content helped re-define the medium's automatism. Photo-novels changed not only their content but also their host medium (the previous installment format was replaced by a tendency to publish complete stories) and their sign type (although the focus on the characters' faces and the preference

given to transparent, grid-like page layouts did not actually change, it was rather intensified).

Another change focuses on the specific signs of the medium, which occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s. In this period the photo-novel tried to achieve a higher cultural status; a direct result of that desire was resorting to a more sophisticated visual language. Color became the default option, though less in reference to color photography (which remained problematic in the spheres of art photography) than to television, where color had become standardised by the late 1960s. A less exclusive foregrounding of the protagonists' faces (hence the larger attention paid to props, setting, and landscape) went along with the introduction of new layout grids which replaced the mechanical alignment of identical pictures by the dialectic intertwining of leading pictures (often occupying more than half of the page) and supporting images (containing much of the verbal information that accompanied the story).

Overall the photo-novel takes sides with the film-novel against cinema in the fine-tuning of its new aesthetics. Unusual angles and additional montage techniques inspired by the basics of film grammar find their way to the pages of the photo-novel productions, which are now presented as film productions (for instance, by the insertion of reportages on 'the making of', initiating readers to the basic techniques of the medium). Here it is the dialogue with the two other aspects of the medium automatism that comes to the fore.

The photo-novel attempts to find a way out of the ghetto of women's and youth magazines, trying out new venues in middle class publications while working to open up the spheres of what is considered 'prestige writing' and 'cultural heritage'. Instead of turning (un)original scripts composed by anonymous hacks into similar items in a different medium, photo-novels now display their aspiration to become prestige adaptations (by real directors and with well-known stars) of 'masterpieces' by either contemporary best-selling authors or giants of world literature. Literary adaptations were not completely new. However, what was new was the self-proclamation of these literary photo-novels as 'super productions'. To a certain extent, this is also what is happening today in modern 'staged photography', where authors such as Gregory Crewdson take pleasure in citing filmic, pictorial, and photographic models (Hitchcock, Hopper, Arbus, etc.) in 'tableaux' featuring rich staging and lighting. However, the real impact on the automatism remains rather low. This kind of photo-novel does not really involve a critical debate with a concept of the medium (as in the period in which the photo-novel was reinventing its own language via the incorporation of the film-novel) as a supposedly fashionable re-styling and re-designing, whose poverty seemed repulsive to the middle-class artists and readers that were cautiously entering the field. For this reason, it is not an overstatement to suggest that the cultural upgrade of the medium did not have lasting effects on its automatism.

Yet another change takes place at the level of the host medium. The new photo-novel that appears from the 1980s onwards elaborates new content and new forms by taking as its starting point the book form and/or the art gallery exhibit. What matters here is not the fact that it is now real artists that are making photo-novels (Duane Michals, Marie-Françoise Plissart, James Coleman, Soll LeWitt) but that this shift in host medium goes along with a much more visible change in content matter (the new photo-novel forsakes the melodrama) and visual style (it foregrounds photography).

Rejecting both the classic photo-novel as its ambivalent cultural upgrade (incapable of re-inventing the incredible dynamics of the original popular photo-novel, as if competing with the boom of art photography in the museum and gallery circuit), the new photo-novel clearly identified the re-definition of the medium's automatism as its main goal. Instead of visualising run-of-the-mill scripts or adapting prestigious novels, these new works proposed a direct alternative to literature, re-appropriating sophisticated literary techniques (the adjective 'new' in new photo-novel refers less to the cinematographic New Wave than to the literary New Novel) while rethinking them in accordance with the medium's specific visual language. Hence the strong suspicion toward the presence of verbal elements in these stories, which were often wordless; also, the exploration of the temporal dimension of the fixed image (see Fig. 3).

Much more than in the previous case, it should be clear that the transformations of the photo-novel here display a real attention to medium logic and medium automatism. Changes in one or more aspects of the medium have an impact on the others. The new photo-novel can indeed be seen as an endeavor – unfortunately not very successful in commercial terms – to establish a new harmony between a new host medium (the book instead of the magazine), new content (the questioning of traditional story worlds and plot formats instead of updating the classic melodrama), and a new form (purely visual instead of visual and text-based).



Fig. 3: Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Aujourd'hui* (Zelhem: Arboris, 1993), p. 60-61 (reproduced with the kind permission of the author).

The medium and beyond

When drawing up the balance sheet of the photo-novel as a medium the results may seem slightly disappointing; not because the medium has not proven to be able to produce interesting works or new automatisms, but because its impact in the broader cultural field has remained very shallow. Despite efforts to migrate to other practices or to establish a dialogue with other arts, the situation of the photo-novel is still problematic. Photo-novels continue to be shunned, and for that difficulty of bridging the gap with other fields the difficult predicament of the medium may be said to be structural and not conjectural.

However, it is not only the photo-novel that appears as a loser in this story; other fields are also missing something by ignoring this underrated medium. Perhaps no other medium is better suited to disclose the inherent mutual relationships between the various aspects of an automatism. What can be scrutinised with such clarity in the case of the photo-novel could be a useful compliment to many media theories in the larger cultural field. In other words, it is worthwhile to explore the photo-novel as a pilot medium and to see to what extent the lessons drawn from this 'simple' case may illuminate the study and practice of other more complex media. One interesting lesson is 'inward-bound' and has to do with a renewed

interest in medium-specificity; another is 'outward-bound' and refers to special forms of interactivity.

The link between narrative and medium-specificity is a very troubled one. Although everybody pays lip-service to the necessity of taking into account the singular features of a given narrative medium, the field of narrative has been stretched so much in the last decade that many scholars are tempted to foreground the general, non-medium-specific aspects of storytelling. This is not a negative evolution, though it would be a pity to forsake the elemental conflict of narrative research, which is essentially torn between the general (what is narrative) and the singular (what is narrative in this single work).

The technical and other difficulties that the photo-novel was encountering in the first years of its existence is the very proof that medium-specificity is really a key issue. The stories told were not new at all: the melodrama was well-known in popular literature; the characters were stereotypes; the installment techniques were familiar to those running certain magazines, etc. However, the implementation of all these elements in the new medium proved to be extremely difficult. People did not know where to put word balloons or captions, or how to write them; they had difficulties in striking the right balance between action and stasis; nobody knew how to control narrative rhythm and to maximise the opportunities of the magazine layout. All of these problems, which the new medium needed various years to solve, suggest that storytelling in the photo-novel is something different from storytelling in other media.

In spite of all the negative stereotypes that surround the photo-novel universe its readership is a very active one. In addition, its high degree of participation is not blocked or hampered by the fact that the photo-novel has been from the very beginning an example of a culture industry, i.e. from a type of cultural production whose driving force is not the inspiration of the individual creator (most photo-novels are published anonymously, the name of the author being replaced by the name of the magazine in which the photo-novel appears) but rather the attempt to find the perfect match between what the industry is proposing and what the public is looking for. Yet even in such a context, the public's activity is very intense and its creative participation is made possible by the various degrees and forms of interactivity invented by the new medium's cultural practice. Many elements play a central role in this interactive reception, among which is the collective dimension of the photo-novel's reading. Targeting a semi-literate and extremely poor audience photo-novels were, at least in the beginning, publications read collectively. They were shared by many readers (which was a way for consumers to cut costs) and they were commented on by groups of readers in places and at moments that fostered public debate (hence the cliché of the photo-novel as typical reading material in places of gossip such as barber shops or laundromats). However, it was

not only the reading of the photo-novel that had strong collective and interactive aspects – the construction of the medium itself obeyed similar laws.

How did readers actually participate in the storytelling? Two mechanisms should be stressed here. First, the industry was inviting the public to feed the scriptwriters and authors with ideas and comments; in certain cases this feedback was ‘hidden’, for instance when the content of the readers’ letters section was ‘recycled’ in the storylines. In other cases it was direct and blatant, for instance when readers were encouraged to write their own stories or to help resolve the decision-making during the unfolding of an installment. Many magazines not only ended their weekly installments with cliffhangers, they also asked their readers how they would solve the big or small enigma raised at the end of the episode. For example, does A (the man) save B (the woman) from drowning because: 1) he is interested in her money; 2) he is a good man; 3) he takes her for somebody else; 4) he is already falling in love with her, etc.

The extremely flexible ways of producing a photo-novel, which allowed for the creation of new storylines almost overnight, were a strong incentive for reader participation. In addition (and probably the strongest form of interaction), both male and female readers were also urged to send in their picture so that they could become a star in the next photo-novel. Most photo-novels were shot in environments that were very familiar to the readership. Moreover, most photo-novels used men and women that had been recruited not through modeling agencies but through beauty contests that were organised in everyday locales. The step from zero to hero was not just a myth – for some young people it was a dream that could really come true (most magazines also featured stories on their actors and actresses and in all cases the proximity of reader and star was strongly emphasised). All of these procedures and mechanisms may seem to be deceptive forms of interactivity (after all, it is the scriptwriter who decides how the story will conclude and it is the producer or the owner of the magazine who picks the next star). A film like *The White Sheik* is certainly right to criticise the illusions of those who can no longer tell the difference between fiction and real life.

However, such a conclusion is suspect; it bears many traces of elite and anti-feminist criticism that is as questionable as the stereotypes it claims to denounce. Other readings of the photo-novel are possible, which foreground, on the contrary, the liberating effects of this medium and its importance for a better understanding of what it means to tell stories not just in general and abstract ways but as cultural practices involving real people in real historical circumstances.

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Notes

- 1 Baetens 2005, pp. 43-60.
- 2 Larson 1995.

- 3 Barthes 1982, pp. 59-60.
- 4 Costello 2008, pp. 274-312.
- 5 Fiorentino 1995, p. 78.