

6

Storytelling
Images,
Engaging
Identities

Massimiliano Fusari



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The why

The above image is the last one of a whole series with the person in front eating some *ta'ammiya* (a very popular kind of fried food in Egypt made from mashed peas) and another one smoking his *shisha* behind him.

As I was taking photographs of my subject, I pictured an *implicit* relation between the two characters in the frame, and searched for ways to record the connection I had drawn in my mind.

After a few shots, I stopped for one last image, and—absolutely unplanned and unexpected by all, them as much as me—for a brief instant they looked in each other's direction and created a story that I could not have planned or crafted any better.

By looking in each other's directions, they *unintentionally* connected two grounds (the background with the foreground) to *implicitly* craft a story of relations. Thus, my role became one of merely representing, by orderly composing lines, spaces, and volumes to prompt in my audiences what I had previously seen in my mind: in so doing, I *explicitly* suggested a multi-layered dialogue in the form of a full range of emotions.

As Mallarme reminds us all, *a throw of dice at any time will never abolish chance.*⁽¹⁾ Photography, and even more so, documentary photography, is as much about preparation as it is about luck: this remains, to me, its foundational feature and the unexplainable poetic power of storytelling.

I have always been fascinated by documentary photography as a space to look into human beings. This began when I realised that, in real life, one plus one never gives you two. If one plus one gave two, we would never fall in love with the wrong person, neither would the doubts we deal with every day torture us as much.

This is *how* and *why* I began taking photographs: to make sense of myself and of others. Photography, in turn, became my toolkit and favourite form of communication. Nevertheless, each form of photography presents peculiarities: digital photography is hardly the same thing as documentary photography or the same language of film photography. To exemplify, the latter would not allow one to preview the result of the shooting, and would constrain any last second change in aesthetic decision-making, by means of the film characteristics, such as black and white versus colour, or the film speed.

The digital can surely be used as simply a different medium to do the same thing as film, and this is indeed the mainstream approach. However, and this is a huge component to my academic research, the digital form could, and—in my view—should be used as a set of communicative opportunities clearly distinct from film media.

This is justified both epistemologically and ontologically: among so many reasons, I could refer to the fact that we can preview digital images, as well as inform the digital image with specificities of any kind (from metadata to camera settings of all kinds, from deciding the colour schemes to the quality and depth of all colours and their relations, and so on), as well as, finally, the extent to which the digital form has penetrated personal and social activities, globally and across all age ranges.

Digital images, like societies, continue to develop and endlessly evolve into something different, which should be dealt with distinctly from a film photograph: does this present an opportunity for a different visual storytelling?

The project that I use as a case study for the present context is my interactive storytelling on Cairo's Tentmakers.⁽²⁾ The project developed as a distinct, yet intertwined, component part of my comprehensive campaign of social communication, which integrated a material exhibition of 40 printed photographs with an online space of personal exploration.⁽³⁾

More specifically, the Tentmakers is a digital platform where users access a comprehensive archive on the tentmakers of Cairo. There are more than 400 images, all of which were researched, produced, and post-produced over my three months of staying in Egypt. Short clips and audio recordings complete a story that aims to be fully immersive without relying on VR/AR (virtual reality/augmented reality) technologies, but instead simply through the evocative power of visual storytelling.

The project thus aims to pivot interactivity as the pillar for the evolving possibilities and opportunities offered by the digital form. By doing so, I wish to challenge the rationale and communicative advantage of, for instance, replicating a material exhibition (like that of my 40 prints) *into* an online linear space.

While, in my view, the storytelling and the overall experience would indeed echo that of the physical space and little more, the digital, as a form of communication, empowers each and every one of us, as both a maker and consumer, to make much more.

Interactive storytelling is thus the key to untie the limitations and constraints that are often taken for granted on what images show and mean. Or, like Mitchell encapsulated so well, on what images want.⁽⁴⁾

All media files on the platform are presented as intertwined semiotic networks. As networks are semiotic, images are connected in an “open” manner and some images have been chosen to “switch” from one pathway to another.

Images do not signify univocally, and this perspective has been built as the pillar for the project to empower viewers as co-creators to the story, as they decide, at certain images, what best fits *that story in development*.

Interactive storytelling is the opportunity that the digital finally brings to the visual form. Interactive visual storytelling is the chance to make images interact, and “talk” to each other while they “talk” to their viewers.

Indeed, by allowing twists to the consequentiality of a visual story, we permit the viewers to engage the shared materials, and rely on the practice of montage to connect the dots *differently*: when dots are edited and connected differently, then the stories the dots evoke will change too. Viewers do not remain passive actors receiving visual *stimuli*, but instead evolve into empowered co-creators.

This situation is not new nor innovative in itself. Interactive frameworks have been around for a long time in literature (allow me to just mention my very favourite one, which is Julio Cortazar’s 1966 *Rayuela*).

Yet, film-based visual media could not use the same flexibility and communicative potential of the paper form, and had to wait for the digital. In other words, the digital form has just made possible what intellectually had been extensively tested on other media: this is the time to make it work for the visual form.

Such a “new” (as applied to the visual form) methodology of communicating requires and presupposes an expanded operative framework that fully intertwines the medium “photography,” the form “digital,” and the language, or grammar of communication, of “storytelling.”

At a time when identities, at both the personal and social level, get questioned to their bones, the visual is a form that is specifically relevant, if not, indeed, crucial. Digital data is more than 90% visual and more than ever we define ourselves by means of visual imagery that has become truly borderless by overcoming the limitations of verbal languages.⁽⁵⁾

I dedicated my professional life to document the stories of others and to find a way to tell such stories to those who don't see others as the "Other," but as a different version of themselves. When this happens, the direct consequence of such a myopia is a search for similarities, rather than an acknowledgement of differences, thus taking away from the journey its essence.

I have often witnessed how preconceived ideas and identity projections, if not stereotypes, overrule any best-intended "open" representation. With "open," I identify images that have the potential to force each and every one of us to ask truly profound questions and challenge who we are to the deepest extent.

Missing the opportunity to experience differences impedes any journey of storytelling, which, by definition, requires proceeding without assumption, expectation or ending. My approach to documentary photography is definitively grounded in this orienting principle, to search for differences, and the tool I use for my journeys of discovery is—consciously and strategically—the camera.

The Image vs. the Images vs. the Stories



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An image might be defined as a depiction of something frozen as it happens, or indeed constructed, upon architectures of time and space: it is a fragment of an unstable and permanently unwrapping whole.

Aristotle's original description of a story was as a "whole that has a beginning, a middle, and an end."⁽⁶⁾ It is my firm conviction that much of my fascination for the image is based on the core challenge of temporality in photography: placing a fragment of time in a generative dialogue with multiple fragments of other times, at the ever-changing time of looking at the photographs. Let me clarify.



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When I took the portrait of Ahmad (above), the photograph was a fragment of our lives and relation, at that specific time, as framed by the lines and shapes that I brought into the composition. That same image might hint, but *never assert*, what might have happened before and after the portrait. For instance, as he was smiling, he might have been smiling before and/or after that specific fragment of time. Equally, he might have been deeply sad inside, but decided to show me something different for whatever reason.

Yet, we still tell stories of depicted events, forging a new array of relations of the event with a before and an after: in fact, we continuously construct new, evolving, and always ungraspable temporal relations.

In generative connection with the fragment of the image at a time, it is necessary to acknowledge that there is another, fully intertwined array of temporal relations. Those of storytelling *in* the image as part of the storytelling *of* the image, and both engage the creator of the image with its viewers. What variables should a creator consider, and what are the tools they have at their disposal to tell stories? In other words, how does a creator “construct” a story?

As a creator, I might decide, for instance, to [1] set a photograph by itself alone and/or; [2] in generative relation to other photographs, thus adding a range of distinct nuances to the image’s core meaning as changed by the number, position, and carrying medium of the images in the whole series; and/or [3] in relation to specific wording/s, with distinct nuances to the image’s core meaning as changed

by the caption's content, style and length, as well as by any other texts (such as a general introduction to the topic), and altered by the specificities of the positioning of the text (with reference to the image/s) as well as by the specific limitations and opportunities of the convening platform.⁽⁷⁾

Up until now, both the image and the story it conveys have been addressed only at the level of production. But there is at least one further dimension of storytelling, that of the conscious/unconscious storytelling of the subject in the image, who might be, as per the example above, smiling for whatever reasons and, consciously or unconsciously, having decided to self-narrate himself in one way rather than another.

Alongside the storytelling of the "creator," there is that of the viewer, the last one I will briefly mention here. The image is endlessly the subject of many stories, precisely because its meaning is endlessly re/negotiated, if not *ab nihilo* created, in the generative relation between the stories told by the image and its viewers. In a way, these are stories of storytellings.

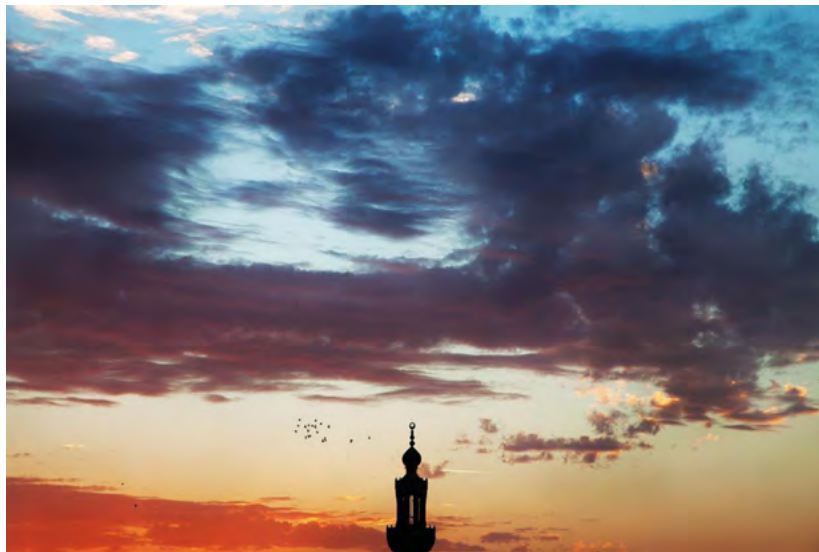
Indeed, if the viewer, any viewer, is, according to Eco, a storytelling machine, then the value and meanings of an image continues to lie beyond the image itself.⁽⁸⁾

Images in fact change, endlessly and eternally, by means of how, why and who looks at them, and tells stories through them, precisely because the viewer doesn't necessarily know what precedes the image as a fragment in time, nor what follows that same infinitesimal moment. Regardless of technological changes and digital innovations, what continues to define the photograph, both ontologically and epistemologically (with the camera aperture), is time and its multiple consequential fragmentations.

A case study: from the image to its storytelling/s

The single image is a multiplicity of co-existing stories, from the portrayed image to its multiple versions as understood, narrated, and even lived by its viewers. I will now briefly refer to one single image to show how this happens in practice.

By reference to the practice of *montage*, I suggest that there is an opportunity for a conscious and strategic intervention to direct meaning-making practices through images.⁽⁹⁾ *Montage* should be best appreciated as the conscious and finalised strategising practice of leading viewers to favour one set of interpretations, against all possible ones. As the challenge to constrain sense-making is a most daring one, *montage* is a way to order elements toward one set of expected results.



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In my courses, I regularly show the above image and ask: *Does this image portray dawn or dusk?* This is an opportunity to make participants explore the diversity of feelings that each visual artifact evokes. In fact, regardless of the students' visual literacy, their feedback is varied, arguing for either option by explicit or direct reference to the very same features of the photograph.

Yet, there are two crucial, and increasingly challenging, arrays of considerations to further address: colours in any image cannot unequivocally justify one answer over

the other, as the digital medium is dramatically dependent on the creator's decision-making process, which ranges from camera settings to colour profiles.

In addition, images are endlessly post-produced, so colours are by far the first and easiest aspect to "alter," with the quality of current camera productions making edits smooth and virtually unnoticeable.

The point I'm advancing is that images challenge issues of storytelling (what can be conveyed through an image, and in relation to its supporting media) as well as those of digital communication (how a digital file is produced and post-produced, seen and pictured, visualised and narrated).

In terms of storytelling, each image is a story in itself (a fragment in time) as well as the story that each person sees at other moments in time, as viewers complement the image with their own sets of interpretations, upon and because of that image. In addition, each image is always and already *a story of its medium*, be it on paper, on a digital slideshow, or on Instagram, as well as the product of its wider framework, that of its presence into a flow of continuous and uninterrupted digital communication, be it verbal, visual, or audio.

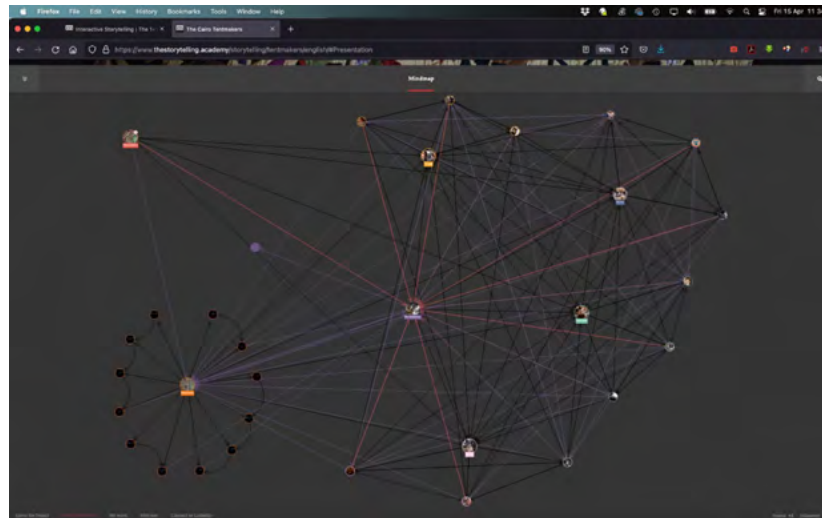
Referring back to the image above, colours cannot support, by themselves, any answers.

Instead, *montage*, merely by making images signify precisely because of their position, rather than because of their internal elements, provides all storytellers with a toolkit to manage images and storytelling complexities. By placing that image at the beginning of a story or at the end of a photo essay, the resulting storytelling will be implicitly *layered* with an element of significance, that of its positioning as a semiotic metaphor: hence the same image, and its same colours, will hint at dawn when placed at the start of a story line, or to dusk, when positioned at the very end. This is what I meant above with *montage* being a toolkit that is beyond and outside the image itself.

Arguably, such a rich framework of possibilities still doesn't solve ontological issues (what is an image), nor epistemological ones (how to tell stories through an image or a set of images/media). I posit my professional work precisely at the centre of such a challenging, evolving, and dramatically misunderstood space for intellectual and practical research.

After many years of both practice and theory, I now combine the two vectors I have at my disposal, the grammar of digital communication, i.e., storytelling, and its language, i.e., the visual by means of images, to search for ways to tell stories with images in a way that leads, as much as possible, to a predictable and expected outcome.

Now Turn the Table Upside Down— The Cairo Tentmakers Project as Co-creation



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Since I returned to academia, I have found myself puzzled by the need to find a serious and well-argued rationale for what I had been previously doing as a photographer. I began researching my professional practice for a common thread and consistent methodological flow. What was I looking at most often? How would I look at that, and even more daring and challenging, how to translate my vision into an understandable and shareable experience?

As I began challenging the issue of “to whom” I show “what” and “how” I do it, I found myself wondering whether online viewers would be best served through creative empowerment instead of any more subtle nudging, like via *montage*. If the image is, in itself, an explosion of meanings, why not allow the viewers to actively engage with them in a conscious manner, instead of reducing their irreducible plurals?

These considerations led me to the field of interactive storytelling, as a space for co-creation for all parties committed to changing the practice and aims of storytelling.

I have explored this issue with the work I produced for the University of Durham on *The Tentmakers of Cairo*. My wider aim with the project I introduced above is to question how to best make sense of the digital form in engaging and communicating

to online audiences, and why interactive storytelling might be the most effective manner to communicate strategically, as well as flexibly, when documenting cultural artefacts and social experiences.

To me, interactive storytelling is—even more than linear storytelling—about rhythm. What dictates my rhythm is a shifting grammar of best practices on montage (such as open with your establishing shot and close with the strongest image) which are then, literally, adopted and adapted by my viewers.

I advance interactive storytelling, as both a field of research and a professional practice, to support journeys of exploration leading to the “Other,” and, in turn, to myself.

I use interactive storytelling to respond to the viewers’ continuously shrinking attention span as combined with the booming of visual media productions and dissemination. My aim is to bring the viewer into the equation through the digital medium. This has become fully possible now and should be prioritised and consistently pursued as what differentiates a photographer from a visual storyteller. On the other side, allowing viewers full creative control might lead to storytelling being hijacked, as others might not necessarily share my same approach and choose personalised control over co-creation.

To manage such a challenge, I first define the space of interaction, i.e., the borders of my story, by choosing which images and what other media will be part of the story. By doing so, I inform the co-creative practice by alternating *fixed* visual pathways, the navigation of the world of Cairo’s tentmakers, with *flexible* decision-making on part of the viewers, through the knots that I set-up to allow the crossing and bridging of stories. I set up buttons (like the one highlighted below) working as hyperlinks so that viewers can disrupt, and re/make, my storytelling according to their priorities, taste, and interests: Why should I impose my story and risk alienating the viewer, when I can instead be in creative dialogue with them?



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Buttons like “The Tea” shown above thus have three main missions: [1] to empower viewers with control, by allowing them to move across stories, admittedly at pre-arranged times, and, by extension, re-tell the story in a different manner; [2] to keep viewers engaged, as clicking a button allows audiences to make decisions and raise their attention span; and [3] enable quantitative tracking of audiences’ activities and chosen pathways through Google Analytics, to identify research spaces for mutual understanding and joint interpretation of stories, while allowing the creator to learn from their viewers’ interests and preferences. By doing so, I fully implement on the digital medium the possibilities of the visual form and the grammar of storytelling.

Let me briefly illustrate this using the first version of my story on bread as an example.⁽¹⁰⁾

I was really proud of the original version of this story, because it contained an image that I particularly liked and regarded as most effective in terms of communication and storytelling. Yet, through the quantitative data collected via Google Analytics, I discovered how my story, on the contrary, turned out to be the one with the highest bounce rate.

My assumptions, and personal preferences, had dramatically impacted the storytelling journey I set up for my online viewers and, in turn, affected their engagement and overall appreciation. With data-driven considerations I re/crafted my story, which then became well-received and contributed to a better navigation of the platform.

Rather than trying to impose or convince my viewers that my story was the right one, I listened to my viewers and understood that there were better ways to tell the story I had in mind, while still sharing my images to make a journey of mutual discovery.

Conclusions

Many, many, many full moons ago, I began taking photographs with my film camera. After a while, I forced myself to overcome the fear of criticism, and slowly started sharing prints of my photographs, first with friends, and, then, with experts and professionals.

I was made aware of the recurrence of certain perspectives and aesthetic choices that were slowly turning into a style: my own way of telling stories, with images. It took me quite a lot to realise it, and see it, as I developed empirically my visual literacy skills.

I started approaching a number of epistemological concerns for my work as a documentary photographer, in addition to some ontological issues: if the photograph of an external event would—still—echo my presence by means of my own style, and my interests in terms of journey toward the “Other,” could I actually narrate anything objectively or would all narrations be just a bit more than a personal commentary? What are the implications of this concern for my work as a documentary photographer? In short, would I still be able to claim that I would *take* a picture rather than *make* a picture?

I have realised only recently how those considerations made me start my own journey of discovery as a self-reflective practitioner who would dedicate his life to photography and the ever-changing field of documentary visual storytelling.

I therefore chose to integrate my practice with the exploration and assessment of a shifting visual literacy that would lead me to explore what it means to photograph, as well as what images are, and, eventually, how images might be very differently interpreted.

In other words, I came to question what it means to communicate visually, and the extent to which an image is “visual” or multi-medial and, hence, truly multi-sensorial. I eventually came to accept that I don’t *take* photographs, but, rather, I *make photographs*, and I do so as I give greater value to my viewers as empowered co-creators of my work.

I remain aware that neither (visual) storytelling nor interactive (visual) storytelling might solve for good the challenges of communicating other identities, societies, and cultures. This has never been the case, and even less so now: I'm not that naïve.

Yet, what interactive (visual) storytelling offers to us all is the opportunity to continuously monitor our communicative abilities and results, as a sort of meditating and critically reflective toolkit to, together with viewers, endlessly learn, discover, and explore.

Massimiliano Fusari is a full professor at the H-Farm College in Venice, Italy and a results-driven digital strategist in the analysis and production of visual storytelling. He is the director of The Visual Storytelling Academy.

The platform is available at <https://www.thevisualstorytelling.academy/storytelling/tentmakers/intro/#Entrance> in both Arabic and English.

For more information, check <http://www.TheVisualStorytelling.Academy>.

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Endnotes

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