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The Photo Novel: a Latin Genre

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From 1947 to 1968, the long-scorned photo novel was one of Europe and Latin America's most popular media formats. This article looks at the genre's diversity, its outward spread from Italy and the ideological and aesthetic reasons for which it was rejected.

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#Universal, but not so much The origins of the photo novel are both clear and fuzzy. According to the cultural mechanism described by Borges, precursors to a genre always exist. However, there is no doubt about when the first photo novel came out: the Italian magazine *Il Mio Sogno* (*My Dream*) published "Nel

fondo del cuore" ("At the Bottom of the Heart") on July 20, 1947. In France, the first photo novels were borrowed and translated: *Festival* magazine, created on June 27, 1949, followed the Italian pattern. However, the key names associated with the genre's origins are less *Il Mio Sogno* and *Festival* than *Grand Hotel* and *Nous Deux* (in Italy and France, respectively).



Cover of *Il Mio Sogno*, January 4, 1948

Source: Collection privée

The first photo novel, published in *Grand Hotel*, a magazine launched in 1947, was "Amarti e dirti addio" ("Loving You and Saying Farewell"). However, it did not come out until 1950. The delay was due to the popularity of the magazine's content, mainly sentimental comics that successfully competed with photo novels for several years.



« Amarti e dirte addio », *Grand Hôtel*, 1950 (no. 228, p. 5)

Source: Collection privée

The first photo novel published in its French counterpart, *Nous Deux* (*The Two of Us*), also founded in 1947, was "À l'aube de l'amour" ("The Dawn of Love", no. 165, August 9, 1950), shortly after *Festival* came out. *Grand Hotel* and *Nous Deux* were best at capturing the spirit of the times that fostered the photo novel's emergence before becoming leaders on both the sentimental press and photo novel markets. The new genre did not come out of nowhere. The stories' pace and structure were solidly rooted in the revival of the sentimental press, the formulas of pulp fiction—the melodrama and the romance novel—and soap opera. It also reflected fascination with the new mass culture coming from the United States at the same time that Hollywood films were flooding into Europe after five years of unavailability (*Grand Hotel* was named after the famous movie with Greta Garbo).

However, the photo novel is a paradoxical example in the context of a globalized or globalizing culture. Right from the start, its success spread beyond Italy's borders, first to France, then to Spain, Portugal and Greece and from there to parts of Latin America, which later saw the emergence of its most effective and profitable iteration, the *telenovela*. A 2017 show at Mucem, *Photo Novel*, highlighted the genre's swift spread across languages and continents while confirming that the photo novel roughly coincided geographically and culturally with the Latin area. Of course, there were photo novels in Germany, the United Kingdom (Hugh Grant started out in teen magazines), the Netherlands and Turkey, but as a general rule it can be considered a typically latin genre.

The photo novel's swift spread in predominantly Catholic countries and resistance in predominantly Protestant cultures is sometimes attributed to the divide between Catholic iconophilia and Protestant iconophobia. While Catholic iconography did have a direct influence on the photo novel (the actresses'

pose is sometimes modelled on the iconology of the Madonna, for example), this explanation does not completely hold up. First, the argument that predominantly Protestant countries resisted the photo novel because of their image-spurning tradition would be more plausible if new visual media were rejected every time they appeared on the market. However, Lutheran countries like Denmark and Sweden enthusiastically embraced movies in terms of both production and attendance. Second, Catholic leaders condemned even the most innocent forms of the photo novel. In the 1950s, the Church accused it of "demoralizing" and perverting the public, implicitly understood as women—tragic but consenting victims of the consumer society's siren songs and aspirations to personal happiness, considered incompatible with their duties as wife and mother. In this context, Catholics were on the same side as Communists, who worried about the power of attraction of the American way of life on display in photo novels. But these explanations underscore the limits of ideological criteriaiconophilia versus iconophobia, left versus right, popular versus elite culture—in the debate over the genre's presence or absence on the scale of globalized cultural relations.

#Strengths and weaknesses

Misunderstandings about the photo novel abound. The most persistent is probably the confusion with comics, of which it is wrongly considered the photographic equivalent. Another-not formal but thematic-involves the genre's restriction to melodramatic subjects and mawkish representations of relationships, its bread and butter. Yet another denounces the genre's static, reactionary character, which has barely changed since the immediate postwar years, when it was already perceived as artificial and cut off from modern reality. Lastly (but the list is far from exhaustive), critics have always lambasted the photo novel's technical and aesthetic clumsiness and shortcomings: actors who do nothing but pose; pitiful staging and photography that make them look like puppets; stereotypical, worn-out tearjerker plots; rudimentary printing; and the total inability to move beyond the formal and narrative constraints that have limited it from the beginning.

Although harsh and sometimes justified, these criticisms cannot be teased out from the wider cultural and economic context. The paragon of low-brow literature, also called "industrial literature", [1] the photo novel has fallen victim to the modern criticism of all fiction genres, turned more towards imitation and emulation than innovation and the quest for the unprecedented, if not the unclassifiable. It has suffered from the material conditions in which it is offered to the public: not in book form, but as trivial, throwaway magazines on the dismissively regarded women's press segment (however, surveys have corrected the largely wrong idea of a predominantly female readership) available at newsstands (the publication of photo novels sold as books in bookstores is a relatively recent phenomenon) and leaving behind no trace or memory (and therefore unworthy of being in libraries and archives). Put another way, the photo novel's drawbacks are not only structural, specific to the cultural industries' least legitimate segments, but also material.

The critical rejection of the photo novel, undoubtedly one of the second half of the twentieth century's most disparaged popular genres, contrasts sharply with its commercial and ideological success. Public enthusiasm was instantaneous and lasting. For over a decade, i.e. until television began permeating homes, photo novels were more popular than movies in Italy and France. Even when its hegemonic position in mass culture began to wane, print runs were considerable. Indeed, the photo novel, even in its most conventional forms, still exists and continues to sell. This enthusiasm spanned a very wide readership in terms of gender (men/women), generations (the photo novel was read collectively, passed hand-to-hand between friends and family) and political beliefs. Ana Bravo's research shows that the

appeal of a "life somewhere else", a taste for exoticism and the pleasure of escapism are shared across the political spectrum. Striking workers overwhelmingly preferred reading *Grand Hotel*, the uncontested market leader, to *L'Unità*, the Italian Communist Party daily. In his posthumously published memoirs, Hubert Serra, nicknamed the "Cecil B. DeMille of the photo novel", wrote that during the Algerian war, photo novels were by far the soldiers' favorite reading material. [2]

What was behind this resounding success? Again, it is not enough to analyze the genre as such: the risk of that is seeing mostly its shortcomings, at least in comparison to comics and movies. But as soon as it is approached as a cultural practice, the photo novel's singularities and strengths become clear.

First, the photo novel had a strategic place among the new type of women's magazine launched after the Second World War. The future press magnate Cino Del Duca built a veritable empire based on picture magazines cheap enough for readers who could not afford such publications until then. Moreover, the photo novel, which soon dominated, then overtook in large part the new magazines' other sections, is a genre whose form and content are highly concerted remediations of cultural practices that were successful with the general public in the postwar years: comics and movies, both of which leaned towards melodrama. Photo novels copied the extraordinarily popular comic strip novel, a sort of sentimental photo novel invented a year earlier in Italy to support the launch of *Grand Hotel* that was immediately imitated by dozens of other magazines. It is not to be confused with American romance comics, which appeared independently, without any European influence, in 1948 within the local comic book industry.



The comic strip novel “Anime incatenate”, Grand Hotel, 1946

Source: Collection privée

While photo novels tried to incorporate all the themes of Hollywood melodramas, success led them to turn away from comics and movies, without, however, breaking with them, to gradually develop their own imagery and aesthetic language. To hold on to their working- and middle-class readers, they had to continue appearing in magazines and observing the melodrama's thematic and stylistic conventions that had been reproduced, all media combined, since the serialized novels of the nineteenth century.

#Unity and diversity (in France)

The "prototypical" photo novel had a standard plot, layout, staging and photographic style. Two people fall in love and get engaged, but melodramatic events based on the theme of persecuted innocence thwart their plans. Readers know that everything will turn out all right in the end, but in the meantime it will take a while to clear up the misunderstandings that keep them apart. That is the price to pay for the pleasure of familiarity. The layout is no less repetitive. The photo board always follows the same pattern: two or three strips with the same number of same-size thumbnails. The photography is as transparent as possible. The actors' poses are always stiff.

Most criticisms of the photo novel focused on the posing, [3] but that is also where its originality lies. To begin with, a chasm exists between the photo novel's unapologetically fictional and artificial world and the stereotypical discourse on the photograph, which is both instantaneous (a snapshot of the moment) and documentary (a trace of reality and therefore proof that it "existed"). This discourse, quintessentially espoused by Cartier-Bresson, dominated thinking about photography for many decades. The gradual emergence of sequential photography and staged images opened up the range of institutionally acceptable photographic possibilities and surely fed in to the current reassessment of the photo novel. This new view of photography, freed from the two-pronged grip of the decisive moment and the referential value of the image, has led to a reinterpretation of the posed shot, among other things. Turning attention away from the action recorded by the camera to the actors' stiff, staged, standard poses becomes not a shortcoming but an advantage. First, the pose focuses the gaze not on the body in action to further the plot, but the erotic power of the actors' faces (usually shot in medium close-up). The photography creates a sense of closeness: the reader's identification with the characters is the key to the genre's success. This identification is never naive, the self-abandonment never complete—except within the stories themselves. A case in point is Fellini's first feature, *The White Sheik* (1952), which is about a naïve, sentimental young wife unable to tell the difference between fiction and reality. The bittersweet film is a parody of the supposed gullibility of photo novel readers (always fantasized as exclusively female, provincial and dim-witted) but also a scathing criticism of the pretentiousness, cynicism and hypocrisy of the genre's professionals—who mask Fellini's real target, the movie industry.

How did the photo novel surpass its prototype, whose weight is still felt today? A quick overview of its development in France provides some insights. Roughly speaking, three periods can be identified that represent as many major types of transformation. They do not mechanically follow each other: overlapping and anachronisms abound, but the differences are clear enough to support the idea of a three-part timeline.

First, the prototype underwent renewal from within and without through parodies. If *The White Sheik* spoofed the photo novel in 1952 just five years after the genre appeared, it is because from the outset it was considered flawed and somewhat laughable. Not surprisingly, photo novels immediately spawned a long string of parodies that followed them like a shadow. *Hara-Kiri*, "the stupid and nasty newspaper" (1960-1986), is the best known but hardly the only example. The Situationist movement lampooned photo novels well before then. The most successful example is undoubtedly the 1955 montage in *Les Lèvres nues*

magazine by Marcel Mariën, Belgian surrealist revolutionary and publisher of the first Situationist texts ("Défense et illustration de la langue française", a satire of a story in *Intimité* magazine). Parody is no stranger to the traditional photo novel itself. Neither the genre's producers nor its readers fell for its clichés, which were often parodied within even the most conventional series. A prime example is *Le Avventure di Jacques Douglas*, a very popular 1970s Italian series that spoofed both photo novels and James Bond movies.

The photo novel's renewal from within involved more than just the stereotypical acting often attributed to the Italian model, an imaginary repellent for everyone who, in France and elsewhere, strove to raise the genre's prestige with formal and thematic innovations. Borrowing from literature was decisive in this respect. In France, high-tone magazines like *Femmes d'Aujourd'hui* commissioned Hubert Serra to shoot hundreds of literary adaptations on location and in period costumes from the 1960s to the 1970s.



Hubert Serra, "Les eaux maléfiques", in *Femmes d'aujourd'hui*, 1982 (no. 52, p. 76)

Source: Collection privée

Gérard Blanchard examined other possibilities of enhancing the genre. In an influential article, he drew a line between the "photo novel" (understood as melodramatic, low brow, shoddy and implicitly patterned after the Italian model) and "novel photo" (positioned as a literary form of today and tomorrow). [4] Drawing from Flaubert, Dickens, Tolstoy and all the nineteenth-century realists went hand-in-hand with tentative formal innovations intended to "raise the level": better photography, widespread use of color and experiments with more expressive layouts. But the essence of the genre remained intact, including in the growing number of works that tried to infuse stories and pictures with "real" everyday life,

not just a dreamed or fantasized one. The replacement of anonymous actors by television and variety stars (one suspects that they are often the same) is the most striking illustration of this desire to reach a new readership.

Second, a new kind of encounter between photo novels and new literature took place. Under Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jérôme Lindon, literary director and managing director, respectively, of Les éditions de Minuit from 1983 to 1987, "avant-garde" photo novels by Benoît Peeters (texts) and Marie-Françoise Plissart (photographs) were published. They were quite different in tone and form. *Fugues* (1983) flirted with the world of the crime novel, while the New Novel influenced *Droit de regards* (1985), which has an introduction by Jacques Derrida. Lastly, the undefinable *Le Mauvais œil* (1987) opened up new avenues that turned the photo novel into a thoroughly modern "mixed" genre with quality visuals and smart stories. Drawing a parallel between the rejection of the hierarchy of genres and the reassessment of minor ones, photography historian Laureline Meizel attributed some young authors' interest in photo novels to a more relaxed attitude towards the modernist dogma of the critique of representation, especially the critique of narrative (the literary equivalent of figuration in the visual arts).



Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Droit de regards* (1985)

Source: Réédition de Marie-Françoise Plissart, Droit de regards, Bruxelles: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2010, p. 38

In the third stage, which began taking shape in the early twenty-first century, the photo novel went off into quite different directions. Social media opened up new possibilities. Many amateur and professional authors posted stories as digital photo novels on Instagram, for example. These narratives often combine autobiography with documentary aspects, like the noteworthy "Café matinal" series by multimedia artist Lia Rochas-Pàris, who had already written a photo novel appropriating the codes of reality shows, *Vasistas*, in 2011. *Le Photographe* (2003-2006), the trilogy by Emmanuel Guibert (text, drawings and

colors), Frédéric Lemercier (colors and layout) and Didier Lefèvre (text and photography), intertwined comics and photography. Digital experiments, crossovers between fiction and non-fiction and hybrid media breathed new life into the photo novel, which, without being an already recognized and legitimate genre, managed to break down the walls behind which it had long been confined.

The photo novel's new visibility would be unthinkable without the contribution of two other factors. First, researchers, critics and historians have set up a network of sometimes informal but very important archives. An example is the "ethno-digital" archive created by Paola Bonifazio, who participated in the photo novel discussion groups sponsored by the Italian publisher Lancio. Second, the worlds of art and cultural heritage have secured an unsuspected future for the genre. The noteworthy coverage of the 2017 Mucem retrospective proved that the photo novel is no longer just a nostalgic throwback but can address contemporary issues. An example is the wall series at the Pompidou Center's *EXTRA!* non-book literature festival, also in 2017.

#Transatlantic migrations

The photo novel spread quickly but unevenly in Latin America. In Brazil, the genre's rise was synergistic with radio soap operas, which were wildly popular in the 1930s and 1940s and were also based on sentimental melodrama. In the 1950s, Radio São Paulo broadcast photo novels adapted from *Encanto* magazine ("Misterioso amor" and "Meu raio de sol"), while *Sétimo Céu* magazine published the print version of at least one soap opera ("*Laura*") from the same radio station. [5] But the success of *telenovelas*, whose origins date back to 1963-64, spelled doom for photo novels, which, admittedly, hanged on for a few more decades but with a much smaller readership and without ever having the same impact as the European models. Brazilian photo novels had three distinguishing characteristics. First, for the most part they remained an Italian import, even though those origins were not always recognized or acknowledged. Of the magazines that made photo novels their bread and butter—*Encanto* (1949-1951, published in São Paolo by Editora Brasiliense), *Grande Hotel* (created in 1947 but publishing photo novels only from 1951 until its disappearance in 1983 after Globo purchased its publisher, Vecchi, in Rio de Janeiro), *Capricho* (1952-1982, editora Abril, São Paolo) and *Sétimo Céu* (1958-2000, also published by Vecchi), only *Sétimo Céu* systematically produced its own stories, which placed a stronger emphasis on the Brazilian context than on the international one (and with quite an early "celebrity" orientation in a very glamorous, i.e white spirit).



Capricho, March 18, 1968

Source: Todocoleccion

Second, they were almost always sentimental and without much humor, irony or the attempts at renewal found in France and Italy (the only, banal, exception being the gradual use of television and variety stars). Third, circulation seems to have been relatively low, which accounts for the lack of influence on Brazil's collective memory. The huge impact of *telenovelas*, which quickly overtook photo novels, probably had something to do with this weak presence.

Historically and sociologically speaking, the Brazilian photo novel was much less important that its Mexican counterpart, which became-and to a certain extent remains-a real social phenomenon, with many publications that defy the imagination and a circulation to match. In an authoritative work, Fernando Curiel listed 81 titles for the 1970s. Most were weeklies, some bi-monthlies and many boasted a circulation topping 500,000 (the market leader was *Lágrimas, risas y amor*, 1963-1995). [6] Unlike their Brazilian counterparts, Mexican photo novels spanned a wide range of genres and targeted more of a male readership (fantasy, horror and eroticism led the pack). The photo novel is a prime example of transmedia "convergence". It started out as a comic book novel. Later, many of its actors, both in Europe and Latin America, were given an opportunity to appear in the movies and on television, two media that eventually killed it. The shift to *telenovelas* and soap operas in Brazil and other countries makes perfect sense in this context, demonstrating the persistence of a serialized, melodramatic vein that has permeated popular culture in every medium since the nineteenth century.

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NOTES

1. Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *De La Littérature industrielle* (Paris: Allia, 2013 [1839]).
2. Hubert Serra, *Voyage au cœur du photo novel* (Paris: Les Indes galantes, 2017).
3. See Yves Kobry, "le Langage du photo-roman," in *L'Art de masse n'existe pas* (Paris: 10/18, 1974), 155-181; Cornelia Butler, Flora L. Jan, "The Fotonovela as a Tool for Class and Cultural Domination," *Latin American Perspectives*, no. 5 (1978): 134-150.
4. Gérard Blanchard, "Du photo novel au photo-roman," *Communication & Langages*, no. 10 (1971): 95-109.
5. Landim Mano, Julio, "Photonovels in Brazil, and the Brazilian photonovel" (PhD diss., University of Leuven, 2016), 160-161.
6. Fernando Curiel, *Fotonovela rosa, fotonovela roja* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1990), 125-129.