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# Photography, Narrative, Time Imaging our forensic imagination

By Greg Battye

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## 1 Foreword

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4 The Editor to the Reader

### 5 6 Foreword 6: On complex matters

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9 Complexity science grew out of the study of chaotic systems in the 1970s. It started from  
10 within the physical sciences and then expanded progressively to include processes such as  
11 infrastructure networks within logistic, the spread of disease within biology, climate change,  
12 finance, sociology, and many other fields. It is one of the fastest-growing areas of science.

13  
14 Despite the great variety of complex systems we live with, they behave similarly. In visual  
15 terms, I would argue that a multi-level narrative in a single image is a good case in point  
16 for a complex system. A narrative is such a complex system that encompasses not only  
17 intentional meaning (of the author) or unintentional interpretation (of the audience), but  
18 also a range of spaces for possibilities for the story to unfold otherwise, in space and time, as  
19 well as similarities with other narratives factual or fictional.

20  
21 It seems to me that what is narrated (and managed) visually is more about behaviour than  
22 content, since it implies a personal response to the matter exposed. That is, image-makers  
23 adopt simple rules to generate a rather complex knowledge system. And this system has  
24 largely replaced older sources of knowledge in popular use, such as text, or oral histories.

25  
26 So what am I confronted with when in front of an image? Is it about seeing the links  
27 in unmatched data, or unrecognized patterns? Is it about reduction of those complex  
28 systems of reading into basic building blocks, which in turn can be modelled and re-shaped  
29 independently from the author of the image?

30  
31 The perceived totality of any complex visual narrative is formed not only by the appearance  
32 and understanding of its component parts (what is represented in the image) but also by the  
33 relationships between those parts (the foreground / background relation; the time / age of the  
image and of the observer; the context / action shown; the casual / staged relation; etc.).

Complexity has indeed increased in every field since the modern age, but particularly in  
the visual culture field. It is quite hard to disentangle interactions and connections between  
various parts of a visual narrative. It is telling that, traditionally, sciences have tackled  
complexity by dissecting complicated systems in order to study each element or cause / effect

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relation separately. But this has caused drawbacks, since failing to spot patterns of interaction has left out important connections that would explain phenomena more thoroughly.

For example, in December 2013, an academic conference aptly titled ‘Grip on Complexity’ took place in Amsterdam, organized by the *Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research* (NWO). The conference explored a number of cases in which a lack of ‘connecting the dots’ caused myopia within the scientific community. One of the cases was about why scientists disagree about what constitutes healthy food. It would seem a rather straightforward business. Instead, since the microbiologist’s vision differs from that of the cell biologist, each one is unable to tackle the question properly; both fail to consider the organism in its entirety.

Hence the surge, spanning a couple of decades, of complexity science as a new approach to tackle collective phenomena. It has involved scientists from different fields with the objective to make sense of ‘transversal’ issues. The study of visual complexity also has started to take place; for instance, the discipline of visual culture studies is well established in many regions around the world. Has this, however, produced a new development in the way that a common ground emerged, say, between artists, journalists, cyber activists, or advertising art directors? Could such an emerging for cross-discipline research into different collective phenomena be sustainable? Would it be possible to formulate common techniques and a common approach to visual complexity in reading a visual narrative? Could this generate resilience, predictability, or a grip on what is produced and diffused visually today?

Many questions, too little answers. The attention ought to be on the connectedness of the various part of a visual narrative, and the method for reading it has to come from different fields. I admit that I am not sure if this ultimately would ‘stabilize’ the overall visual system, or rather break it up even more. But surely the traditional ‘isolate-and-reduce’ method to visual literacy rarely works well. We appreciate art, or reportage, or visual gaming, or simulation engineering, but we miss the links between the four that may as well address the same subject. The robustness of our capacity to decode our life passes through the possibility to combine these unlikely bedfellows, as amplifiers of our ability to process and do things. The combination might provide some surprising insight into our own, highly connected society.

Alfredo Cramerotti  
Editor, Critical Photography series