How to Write a Photo Novel
Ennio Jacobelli's *Istruzioni pratiche per la realizzazione del fotoromanzo* (1956)

JAN BAETENS, CARMEN VAN DEN BERGH, BART VAN DEN BOSSCHE

Abstract: This article offers first a brief historical overview of the photo novel, which is much more than a comic with photographs. The key to a good understanding of the genre is its close connection with women's weeklies and melodrama culture. In the second part, the article addresses the issue of authorship in photo novels and the tension between collective authorship and individual creation, and examines the role of the editorial voice of the magazine, which is paramount in the world of the photo novel, where individual creations were not always signed. In its third and final part, the article offers a close-reading of a rare document, a 1956 photo novel manual by Ennio Jacobelli, entitled *Istruzione pratiche per la realizzazione del fotoromanzo* ("practical guide for the production of a photonovel"). In our analysis, the main focus lies on the gap between the actual production of the photo novel in this period and the models and advice given by the manual.

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From drawn novel to photo novel

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In 1946 a new magazine hits the Italian newsstands. Named after a successful 1932 film starring Greta Garbo, itself already an adaptation of a no less successful 1929 Vicky Baum novel, *Grand Hôtel* is still known today as the magazine that was for many decades the leading publication, together with its French sister magazine *Nous Deux* (published by the same Italian editor as *Grand Hôtel*), of a very special and typically "Latin" genre, the photo novel—roughly speaking: a romance comics with photographs. The ambition of this essay is to sketch, via the study of a photo novel manual, some particularities of this very hybrid genre and to examine some relationships with the general topic of authorship, an issue that is generally overlooked if not utterly ignored in discussions of the photo novel.

The launch of *Grand Hôtel* was definitely a watershed moment in mass media culture in Italy. The magazine, which was sold for approximatively 1/3 of the prize of comparable weeklies, would not only boost and rejuvenate the world of women's magazines, until then mostly turned toward middle brow audiences. It initially also featured another new genre that is seen today as the precursor of the photo novel : the drawn novel (the term itself is a translation from the French "roman dessiné", not to be confused with the graphic novel that will only emerge in the late 1970s).[1] A clearly recognizable hybrid of comics on the one hand and the many forms of film-novel or illustrated novelizations on the other, the drawn novel achieved almost instantaneously a hegemonic position in the world of newsstand magazines. Even though most traditional sections of the women's weeklies (such as the horoscope, letters to the editor, the gossip column, the short story etc.) did not totally disappear, the drawn novel rapidly took so much of the available space (and in these years of paper shortage, this was not a trivial issue) that one could say that **women's magazines** tended to become first and foremost **drawn novel magazines**.

The instant success of the drawn novel was however short-lived. The real killer application of the new weeklies would be another format that appeared one year later, in the pages of journals like *Il Mio Sogno* (first issue: 8 May 1947) and *Bolero Film* (first issue: 25 May 1947). This format is first called "romanzo d'amore a fotogrammi", literally: *love story in pictures* (a complicated paraphrase that reveals how new the genre was). It would soon be become known as "fotoromanzo" or photo novel, a neologism that had initially been coined by *Bolero Film* in order to distinguish itself from its competitor, *Il Mio Sogno*. In English, the near-equivalent "photo novel" is often used in a restrictive sense, which refers to the adaptation of "a film or television episode and using film stills instead of artwork along with the narrative text and word balloons containing dialogue".[2] This restriction clearly has to do with the absence of traditional photo novels in the Anglophone market, where only a certain type of photo novels (in Italy called "cineromanzo", i.e. film-novel in photo novel format) were released for the mass market, mainly around 1970.

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[1] On the genre of the *drawn novel*, see Jan Baetens, "Le roman dessiné", in *Yale French Studies*, No. 131-132, "Bande dessinée. Thinking Outside the Boxes", eds Lawrence Grove and Michael Syrotinski, 2017.
[2] "photo novel", *Wikipedia,* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Photonovel (last accessed 23 February 2016).

The origins of the photo novel cannot be understood without the drawn novel, the former being a photographic remediation of the latter, but its forms and contents came soon to be independent from its drawn ancestor. Contrary to the drawn novel, which will slowly vanish during the fifties (its last examples in the popular press are from the early sixties), the photo novel was there to stay for a very long period. It even continues today, although no longer with the same editorial and societal presence and impact as in the years between 1947 and the late sixties that truly were the golden years of the genre. The photo novel is part of a specific sector in the culture industry—that of women's weeklies—but of all the genres in these publications, the photo novel was definitely the most "sloppy" genre, for aesthetic as well as ideological reasons. It was characterized by poor photography, bad printing, terrible acting, silly stories, uneventful and mechanical grid page layouts, and above all a reactionary tone in treating love and human interest combined with a stubborn refusal to acknowledge what goes on in the real world. In short: if one would observe the culture industry through an Adornian lens, the photo novel necessarily would come out as utterly silly and alienating. For this reason, *Regards*, a cultural magazine associated with the French Communist Party, in the 1950s published a politically correct parody of the "lies" of the photo novel industry (see Fig. 1), to denounce the photo novel genre in particular and women's weeklies in general as so many forms of American imperialism.

Figure 1: "La Loi du mensonge", in Regards No. 352, August 1952

For the abovementioned reasons, the photo novel may very well be seen by many as the ultimate example of backwardness and stupidity, yet from a mediological as well as cultural-historical point of view this despised genre is a complex and therefore very rich phenomenon. Formally speaking, the photo novel is utterly hybrid: it owes much to several other visual media such as film and comics while at the same time exploring its own medium-specificity in original ways. Institutionally speaking, the photo novel presents an even greater ambivalence. The format is invented almost overnight and the incredibly swift and enthusiastic response of the audience sparks a sudden need for a large and continuous production. [3] To many producers and magazines, the sky seems the limit, yet the instant success of the photo novel does not mean that everything is possible. On the contrary, with its fast publication rhythm and its ruthless competition in an often politically hostile environment, the popular magazine business is something of a Wild West, and in order to remain successful—or even just to remain afloat—the photo novel has to stick to recognizable formulas.[4] As they are not readily available, these formulas need to be created, but once they have been established, they will determine for many decades what a photo novel should look like.

Photo novels and the question of authorship

As far as authorship is concerned, the photo novel raises two major questions. The first and simplest one is that of its actual makers. The production of a photo novel is always a collective enterprise, involving very different agents and participants—a situation more or less comparable to that of the film business. Yet, contrary to the film business, at least as it existed in the 1940s and 50s, many photo novels were not credited at all. Photo novels did have directors, scriptwriters, photographers and the like, but their names rarely appear in the pages of the magazines where these works were published. This absence raises a second and more complex question. Indeed, it does not suffice to suggest that the anonymous character of many publications reflected the lack of prestige of the photo novel. This may have been the case, but such a conclusion would blind us to the presence of other forms of authorship. The fact that the photo novel frequently omitted the names of its makers, did not prevent it from applying another form of authorship, in this case the collective authorship of the magazines that commissioned and published photo novels. Next to *Grand Hôtel* (in Italy) and *Nous Deux* (in France), there existed dozens upon dozens of other photo novel magazines whose unique selling proposition was always that of a distinctive house style. Each magazine followed the

[3] The discussion on who actually invented the photo novel formula is still open. For more details, see the historical survey of Marion Minuit, Dominique Faber and Bruno Takodjerad, *La Saga Nous Deux* (Paris, éd. Jean-Claude Gawsewitch, 2012), p. 39.

[4] On the photo novel "business", see Isabelle Antonutti, *Cino Del Duca, de Tarzan à Nous Deux* (Limoges: PULIM, 2013). "Wild West" is not simply a metaphor. We invite our reader to see it as a wink to the "jungle" of the men's magazines sardonically evoked by Harvey Kurtzman, the editor of *Mad*, in a biting parody that all scholars of popular literature should read as an essential inside report that is also a forerunner of the "graphic novel": *Harvey Kurtzman's Jungle Book* (New York, Bantam, 1958).

general rules of the genre format, but tried to apply them in its own way, introducing a number of smaller or bigger variations that allowed it to distance itself from its competitors in the newsstands. In other words: photo novels did not have to be signed, for in many respects they already bore the signature of the magazines that printed them.

Because of the formal hybridity of the genre as well as the extreme economic pressure, the photo novel is produced in a state of both emergency and uncertainty. In such a context, training and instruction are crucial, since newcomers have to learn as rapidly as possible how to play their role in this tiresome but lucrative game, and, as the photo novel was a booming business, there were many of such newcomers. As is often the case for this kind of not yet institutionalized practices, learning and teaching is often quite informal and experience-based: people learn by example and are trained in a tutor-pupil context. A lot is also done outside formal education: those interested in the business can take distance courses, for instance in drawing or photography, and of course much knowledge is also pragmatically transferred from one domain to another. Professionals in the film business will supplement their income by working for a photo novel magazine, which provides new opportunities to all kinds of hack writers and other members of the editorial staff.

How to become a photo novel maker?

Yet how is this training organized? In light of what has been explained above, it should be clear that the collective authorship of the photo novel—that of the magazine commissioning a certain type of photo novels, in order to target new audiences or to rival and eliminate a competitor– is a matter of industry strategy. The actual makers are in the first place subcontractors, who have to prove that they are capable of delivering in a fast and reliable way the commissioned products. In practice, things are of course somewhat more complicated, as all studies of the cultural industries demonstrate, but in general the distinction between these two types of authorship (collective authorship vs individual makers) is one of the key characteristics of the photo novel business. Hence of course the importance of a very specific type of training: not the fine arts training of artists committed to the production of highly individual and original works, but the vocational training of professionals capable of entering not an art but a business. This vocational training, however, was never institutionalized, because the need for qualified workers in this cultural industry was not strong enough to justify the creation of a specialized program. There may have been a strong need for people trained to write stories, to make photographs, to work in the film business, etc., but in spite of the social presence and impact of the photo novel, the photo novel business remained small and it would have been absurd to create special courses in, say, photography for photo novels. Hence the importance of informal training on the job, and the usefulness of instruments outside traditional education.

In 1956, the Editrice Politecnica Italiana publishes a photo novel handbook by a certain Ennio Jacobelli, entitled *Istruzione pratiche per la realizzazione del fotoromanzo*

("practical guide for the production of a photonovel") (Fig. 2).[5] It is part of a "learning by seeing" series that the publisher explicitly links with the needs of modern mechanical society. The list on the back cover of the other volumes in this series evokes a context of vocational learning, clearly targeting a less-educated audience eager to achieve practical knowledge outside traditional educational structures (most courses are on electromechanics, with an emphasis on television appliances). In terms of authorship, this is a perfect match with the separation of collective authorship (the commissioning organization) and individual makers, who often accept their anonymity, for they accept the power balance of the photo novel and know that their role will be that of a subcontractor, not that of an inventor who will be credited for his creative endeavours.

Figure 2: Front *cover of the book*

The introduction of the manual clearly sets the stakes: the point of the book, which closely follows the step-by-step approach typical of this kind of illustrated handbooks, is to show that the production of a photo novel is not the same as that of a film. Jacobelli's *Istruzioni* in many regards reflects quite well the state of the photo novel business in the

[5] During the 1950s and 1960s the Editrice Politecnica Italiana published a series of volumes for educational and practical purposes, such as the collections "Scienza e scuola" or the "Fumetti tecnici" (technical cartoons) with instructions for technicians, workers and/or students. These manuals were initially illustrated by drawings, but in the later volumes photographs were inserted. There is no trace of other kinds of publications, and this makes us think the editor survives only on these didactic manuals. In some publications the publisher is mentioned as "Editrice scuola politecnica italiana" with an emphasis on the educational character. In fact, the back cover of the manuals states that the "istruzioni pratiche" can be studied independently, and that one can subscribe to a series of lessons to go along with the manual. Each book cost approx. 750 lire (approx. €11 today according to the conversion tool available on the website of ISTAT—Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/155139; last consulted on 6 June 2017). A professional degree is delivered after have passed several tasks and tests. All publications are printed at the Tipografia Ferri in Rome with the same typeface, green covers and landscape orientation.

mid-fifties. By 1956, the photo novel had a well-established format, stable and solid enough to be the subject of a professional how-to handbook. In this period, it is also clear that it is part of the larger film business. On the one hand, the photo novel is still the most important springboard for young actors and actresses who try to make it in *Cinecittà*, and some well-known success stories of stars who launched their career thanks to the photo novel include actresses such as Gina Lollobrigida and Sofia Loren. On the other hand, all films in these years were novelized in photo novel format, and due to the exceptional power of the photo novel formula these adaptations completely abandoned previous formats of the *cineromanzo*. Nevertheless, Jacobelli's *Istruzioni* are extremely fascinating because of some quite puzzling (not to say weird) aspects. First, the models of the photo novel presented as examples to follow do not really match contemporary practices. Secondly, contentwise, these models are also different from what one might expect from such a book: it opens a window on Italian society that may intrigue modern readers. In our reading of the *Istruzioni*, we will try to analyze these two particularities, while trying to understand why this manual is much more than just a how-to manual addressing would-be professionals.

A "Canady Dry" photo novel?

Ennio Jacobelli explains it all. His book covers all possible technical processes in the making of a photo novel and it also details the many steps from the very first idea until the final realization. At the same time, he systematically draws attention to the collaborative aspects of the business and the difficulties of coping with so many different people (not rarely with big egos): hence his tart remarks on the lack of punctuality of actors. Timing is a major issue, as Jacobelli never ceases to insist. At first sight, the description of these technicalities and the tasks and responsibilities of the various persons involved in the production of a photo novel seems extremely plausible, and one can take these *Istruzioni* as a reliable source as far as these aspects are concerned. However, the images and examples do not only show and describe the kind of lamps one needs in order to correctly light scenes or how to instruct the printers on layout. They also exemplify prototypical scenes, forms and contents of a photo novel, but these will likely have surprised actual readers of the genre. Many will have failed to recognize the kind of work they passionately devour week after week in *Grand Hotel* or similar magazines.

Jacobelli's virtual photo novel is didactically correct but culturally wrong. It looks like a photo novel, it seems to have to same feel and taste, but it is not a real one. It is, to use a metaphor borrowed from the domain of constrained writing, a "Canada Dry work".[6] Just as Canada Dry was once marketed as an alcoholic drink without the alcohol, a "Canady Dry work" is a work that copies a certain format or formula without actually performing its essential function. In the case of the *Istruzioni*, this lack of authenticity is

[6] "Oulipost #29: Canada Dry", *The Found Poetry Review*, http://www.foundpoetryreview.com/blog/oulipost-29-canada-dry (last consulted on 6 June 2017).

of course not due to the fact that the book does not include real photographs. After all, the drawings that illustrate the book can function perfectly well as parts of a photo novel storyboard (although Jacobelli remains quite silent on this part of the production) and from that point of view there is little difference between the example presented by the handbook and actual photo novels, which may have been based on storyboard drawings as well. The differences with actual production during the mid-fifties lie elsewhere, and are much more fundamental, both at the level of content and at the level of the formal features of the photo novel. It makes sense to distinguish here quite sharply between form and content, since Jacobelli gives more attention to the former than to the latter. This imbalance is, once again, a direct consequence of the organization of the photo novel business: photo novel makers know that they will receive a pre-constructed story which they will not be allowed to modify, but which they will have to visually materialize in a smooth and rapid manner.

Regarding the themes and plots as suggested via the examples, one can only be struck by the emotional sterility of the *Istruzioni*'s content matter. On the one hand, most of the examples foreground rather banal situations (waiting for a bus, saying hello to a girl in the street, walking back home after work), light years away from the often excessive passions and situations of the melodrama that shape the photo novel universe. There are no impossible love stories, no lost children coming back from the past, no rape or incest or murder, no guilty focus on certain body parts, etc. Furthermore, none of these situations is part of an extended narrative, which further rules out dramatization. Many little scenes succeed each other, but they do not together form a single story, so that the examples given by Jacobelli are not what photo novels are expected to be: fast-paced page-turners with often contrived cliffhangers and frequent plot twists. The more implausible the better, could be the motto of a true photo novel aficionado. The reason for this restraint is easy to understand: Jacobelli must have tried to avoid all sensationalism that could distract the reader from doing what he or she is supposed to do, namely learning by scrutinizing the images and their arrangement on the page. One understands that in the didactic perspective of the book, a good example is a "simple" example, i.e. a model that only shows the specific technical feature to be studied while effacing all the rest. In this respect, the manual clearly focuses on the making of a photo novel as a craft or skill that does not have much to do with actual story contents. The shallowness of the content matter may have to do also with the "emptiness" of the characters, who are never considered as actual or possible "stars". Cause and effect cannot be told from each other here: is the content matter banal due to the fact that Jacobelli cannot reasonably suggest that his readers will have the possibility to hire Sofia Loren or Gina Lollobrigida—whose very presence is synonymous with passion and drama, regardless of the story in which they are placed—or is it the banality of the situations sketched that excludes all *dive* and *divi* from the imaginary photo novels of the handbook? Whatever one may think of this question, the relative banality of most scenes does not mean that once in a while certain elements do not come to the fore, even if the author does everything he can to keep all forms of excess and passion beneath the surface: if the photo novel is the reign of passion, this handbook is definitely limited to a

strictly technical approach to utterly simple situations, all borrowed from daily life and hence easy to photograph for all those who want to try their hand at a photo novel without having access to professional means.

Regarding the formal features of the photo novel, Jacobelli's handbook is dramatically specific and precise and here it is less easy to grasp the dissimilarity between his theoretical model and the actual practices in the field. Roughly speaking, these differences appear at all three levels that organize the visual aspects of the photo novel: that of the **frame** (what is pictured in the image?), that of the **sequence** (how is the transition from one picture to another arranged?) and that of the **page layout** (how are the photographs presented on the spread?).

First of all, the prototypical pictures never suggest any dynamic action: the characters are always shown in quiet, simple, banal actions, which are not part of larger action schemes, that in most photo novels tend to be lively, if not violent. One of the major difficulties of the photo novel is to strike the right balance between the extreme dynamism of many of its actions and the inevitably fixed character of its images, the double solution given to this problem being that of the "portrait" as well as the "pose", which are the medium-specific answers given to this fundamental material difficulty.[7] But there is not a word on this issue in Jacobelli, and no trace of any struggle with the absolutely basic problem of the dialectic relationship between the moving and the fixed.

Secondly, the sequential arrangement of Jacobelli's model is surprisingly cinematographic, that is linear (Fig. 3). The juxtaposition of images always complies with the form of a strip, one image succeeding another on a horizontal line. Each of these images represents one successive moment of an ongoing action, such as entering a room, undressing, sitting down on a couch, having a drink, etc. All this may seem logical and self-evident, but it is not at all what one finds in a photo novel, at least not in a photo novel that "works": photo novels that follow the implicit montage rules put forward by the *Istruzioni* would be utterly boring, bad copies of a cinematographic logic that is not that of the photo novel medium. Actual photo novels do not just align pictures that follow each other from left to right, row after row, and most of the times the transition from one image to the other does not correspond at all with a progression in time. In other words: if photograph A is followed by photograph B, the latter does not necessarily represent a moment in time B that comes after a moment A. Here again, the difference between Jacobelli's manual instructions and actual practices is absolute.

[7] Cf. Jan Baetens, "The photo novel: Stereotype as Surprise", *History of Photography* 37-2 (2013), 137-152.

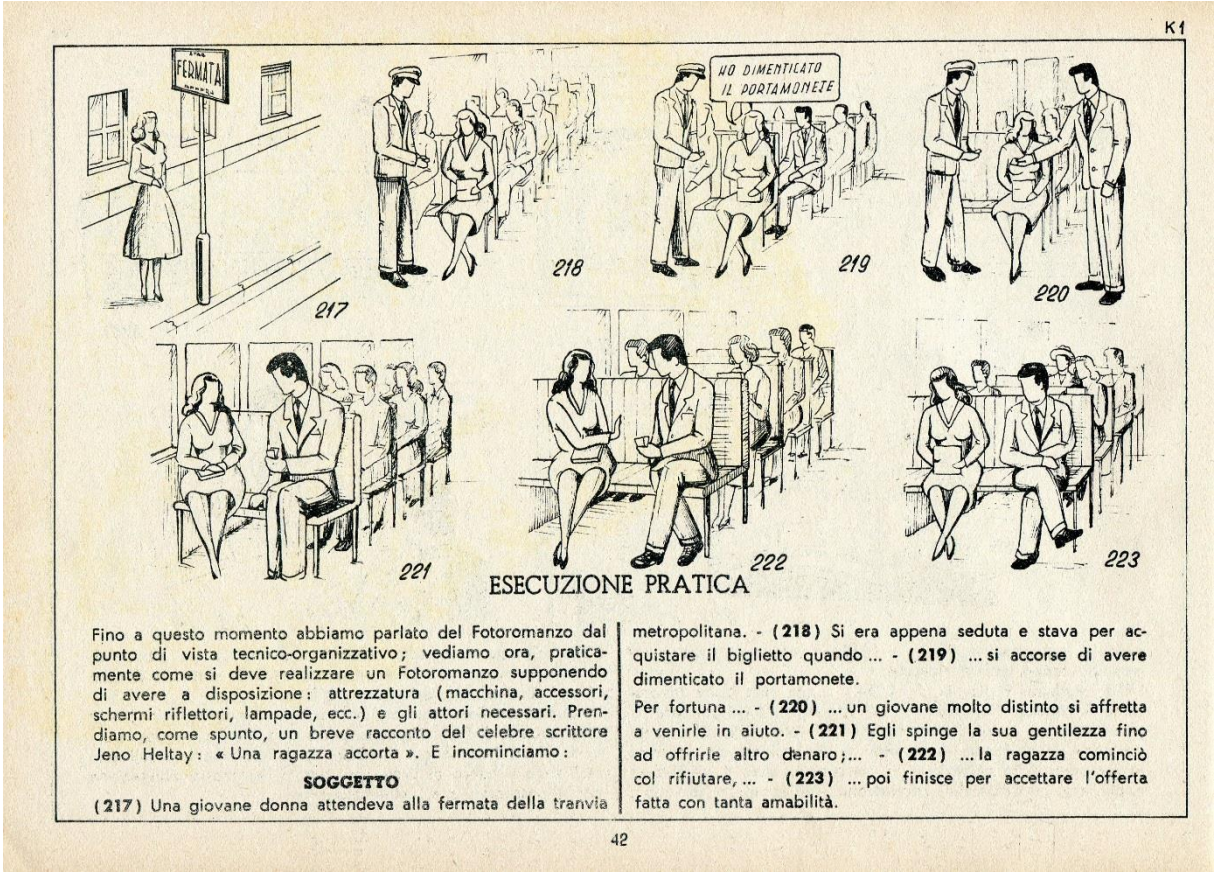

Figure 3

Thirdly and finally, none of the examples of page layout given by the handbook match the layout principles of the actual photo novels of the mid-fifties (Fig. 4). Not that these are always as imaginative and varied as we would like them to be, as many photo novels obey the mechanical grid of two or three identically sized pictures per row; but none would be allowed to abandon the standard editorial format in which the photo novel circulates. In the *Istruzioni*, the implicit model of page layout is based on a horizontal format (vaguely resembling that of a film screen), whereas the only model used in the photo novel business is that of the vertical format of the magazine (of similar dimensions as an A4 size, even if many magazines of the period were still slightly larger). Here again, future professionals having acquired their knowledge via Jacobelli's manual would not be ideally prepared to perform, at least as far as this part of the job is concerned.

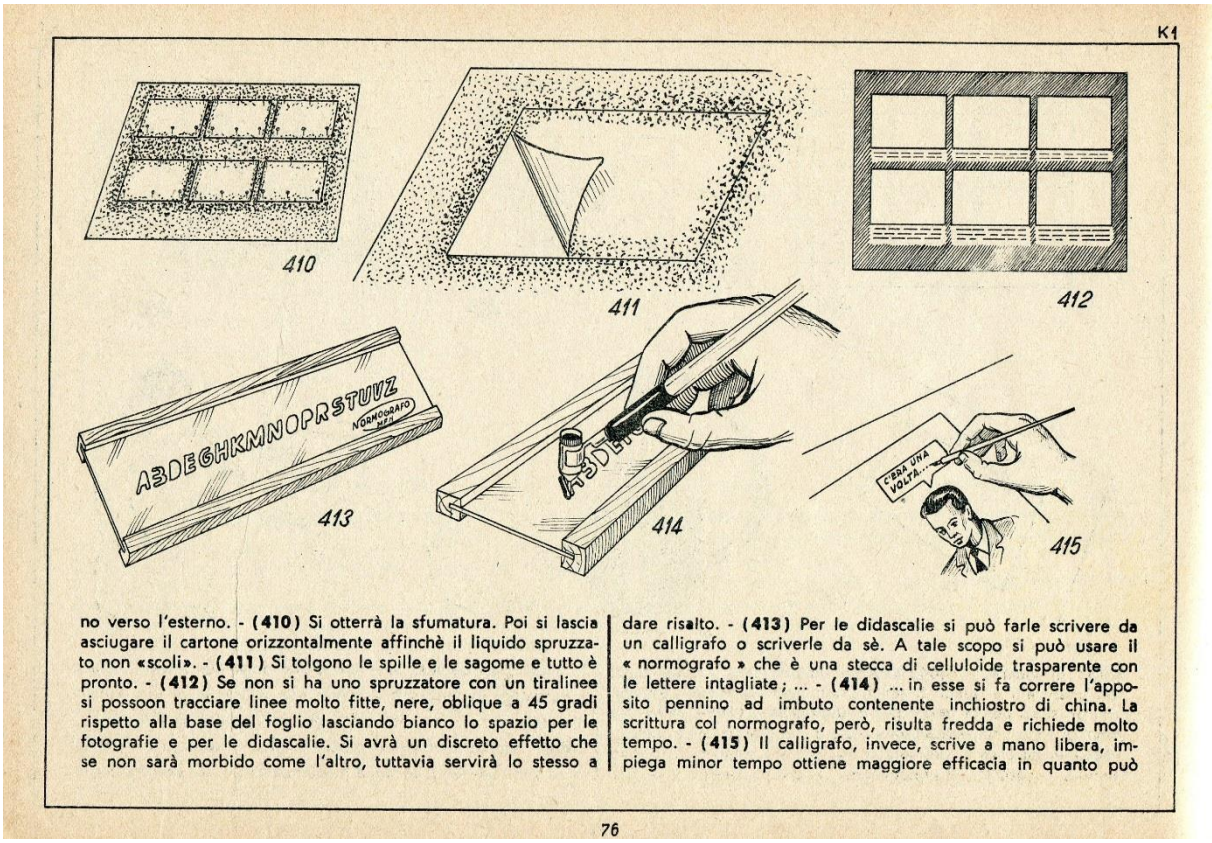

Figure 4

Further differences could be enumerated, but it is more important to try to understand the reasons for these strange discrepancies. Jacobelli is clearly knowledgeable of how photo novels are made, and his expertise covers all possible levels and aspects of their production. Nevertheless, he presents a photo novel format and formula that is quite different from what readers know (and like!). This difference, however, is far from absurd, provided that one frames it beyond the mere description of empirical differences, taking into account the imaginary status of genres and the mediological impact of the host medium.

Genres do not only have an "objective" existence, rooted in the presence or absence of more or less precisely defined characteristics.[8] They also have an imaginary dimension, in the sense that genres are what **we** think they are. It is the plural that matters here: the imaginary dimension is never that of a subjective individual, it is always that of a group, a community. Given the strong and direct relationships between photo novel and cinema, it is to be expected that instruction manuals on how to make a photo novel include references to filmmaking, even if the authors of such manuals rightly warns against the confusion between both. Jacobelli is no exception: his introduction stresses the specificity of the photo novel in comparison with cinema. Yet in many cases the power of the culturally dominant model, which is of course not the

[8] Cf. Jan Baetens, Johan Callens, Michel Delville, Bertrand Gervais, Heidi Peeters, Robyn Warhol & Myriam Watthee-Delmotte, "LMI/Genre/Medium: a Research Update", in *Germanisch Romanische Monatsschrift* 64-4 (2014), 485-492.

photo novel but cinema, continues to have an impact on how the dominated genre is theorized. Here, the *Istruzioni* abundantly demonstrate the lasting impact of the filmic imaginary through the obvious links with certain handbooks of scriptwriting and storyboard techniques, for example at the level of the sequential arrangement of the pictures (that of a film strip divided in successive stills), that of the page format (that of the screen instead of that of a photo novel magazine), and finally that of certain drawing techniques as well (which keep for instance the faces of the characters vague and "general" in order to avoid casting problems with concrete actors).

In addition to this imaginary dimension, there is also the mediological dimension of the host medium. When the photo novel is visually evoked of described, for instance in a manual but also in other media such as a film, its very format tends to be influenced, if not dramatically changed by the material properties of the medium that is representing it. It is not a coincidence that when showing the shooting of a photo novel in *The White Sheik* (1952), Fellini actually shows the shooting of a film disguised as photo novel (or vice versa) rather than the shooting of a real photo novel. It is, in other words, as if the filmic shooting of a photo novel transforms the latter into a film, and from a mediological point of view this is perfectly logical. A similar mechanism takes place in Jacobelli's *Istruzioni*, since the author takes as the default page layout of his imaginary photo novel the size and format of the pages of his own book, while at the same time imposing the "step-by-step" approach of an instructor's manual to the sequential arrangement of the pictures, which cease to be examples of real photo novels in order to become images that lend themselves to a certain didactic system: first this, then that, and for each step one image. At the same time, there is also the strong influence of comics. Drawn images much better fit the needs of a didactic publication, for drawings—unlike photographs—are selective and can emphasize what has to be noticed and understood; in addition, the sequential structure of comics perfectly matches the method of this kind of handbooks. It therefore does not come as a surprise that Jacobelli's handbook also explains, though very briefly, what a "fumetto" or comic is.[9]

But we must now return to some content issues, for it does not suffice to just mention the gap between Jacobelli's quiet and banal fragments and the excessive passion of the typically photo novelistic melodrama. Here as well, the mere description of this kind of tension is not sufficient.

Not so simple a story

As already stated, the *Istruzioni* refrain from any form of melodramatic content or excess. In none of its illustrations, there is the slightest hint of glamour. Featured are everyday situations, ordinary people, simple feelings, all alien to the escapism and flight out of daily life that are traditionally held against the photo novel. Jacobelli cleverly counters this rebuke by focusing on seriousness, both in his treatment of fictional

[9] Jacobelli 1956, p. 64.

subjects as in the attention he pays to documentary photo novels (even if the latter are far less present in the step-by- step guide to the actual production).

In doing so, the author of the *Istruzioni* comes close to a different reading of the photo novel, namely the idea that the photo novel has a crucial documentary dimension, not only for its contemporary readers (even though they might have been more sensitive to its escapist function), but also and probably much more directly for modern readers, who may recognize in the world of the photo novel an unexpectedly convincing image of its historical context and situatedness. The mimetic value of the photo novel's fantasy world can be described as follows. First of all, there is of course the fact that its basic units are photographs, i.e. images having an indexical relationship with an actual reality. Since most photo novels are produced on a shoestring budget, the settings are always real-life environments (the living room or the kitchen of an actor, the streets of the neighborhood, real trains and real buses with real people, etc.), so that there are good reasons to believe that what we see in a photo novel does give some insight in the actual living conditions of the moment of its realization (even efforts to "decorate" this environment can be seen as representative of a *Zeitgeist*). Secondly, the strong ties that link the world of the photo novel with that of cinema cannot be reduced to the single strand of Hollywood's dream factory. True, quite some photo novels try to cash in on the fictional world created by American studios. It cannot be denied, however, that there is also a strong proximity to Neo-Realism,[10] which automatically signifies an increased presence of raw, i.e. untreated "actualities" but also of melodramatic elements.[11] Thirdly and finally, several photo novel scholars also defend the idea that in spite of the apparent otherworldliness and Bovarism of many photo novels, the genre in itself has proven to be sometimes capable of being the channel of important societal positions and claims, much of them open to the idea of women's emancipation, if not frankly protofeminist.[12]

From this point of view, it may be interesting to have a closer look at certain imagined scenes of the manual, which at first sight do not fit into that model. Modern readers will certainly experience a little shock when opening the book at pages 48-49. In twelve images, neatly segmented according to the sequential logic already mentioned, we witness a dating scene whose curious ending comes as much as a surprise for the character as for the modern reader (Fig. 5 and 6).

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[10] For a concrete example, see Giovanni Fiorentino, ed., *Luci del Sud. Un set per Sofia* (Castellammare di Stabia: Longobardi editore, 1995).

[11] As clearly demonstrated by studies such as Emiliano Morreale, *Cosí piangevano. Il Cinema melò nell'Italia degli anni cinquanta* (Milano: Donzelli, 2011).

[12] See Sylvette Giet, *Nous Deux 1947-1997. Apprendre la langue du coeur* (Leuven/Paris: Peeters/Vrin, 1998). For the Italian context, see also the famous photonovel "La Femminista" (Director: Fernando de Giorgio), Fotoromanzo Albo Bolero-Serie I Migliori, No. 5, 1973.

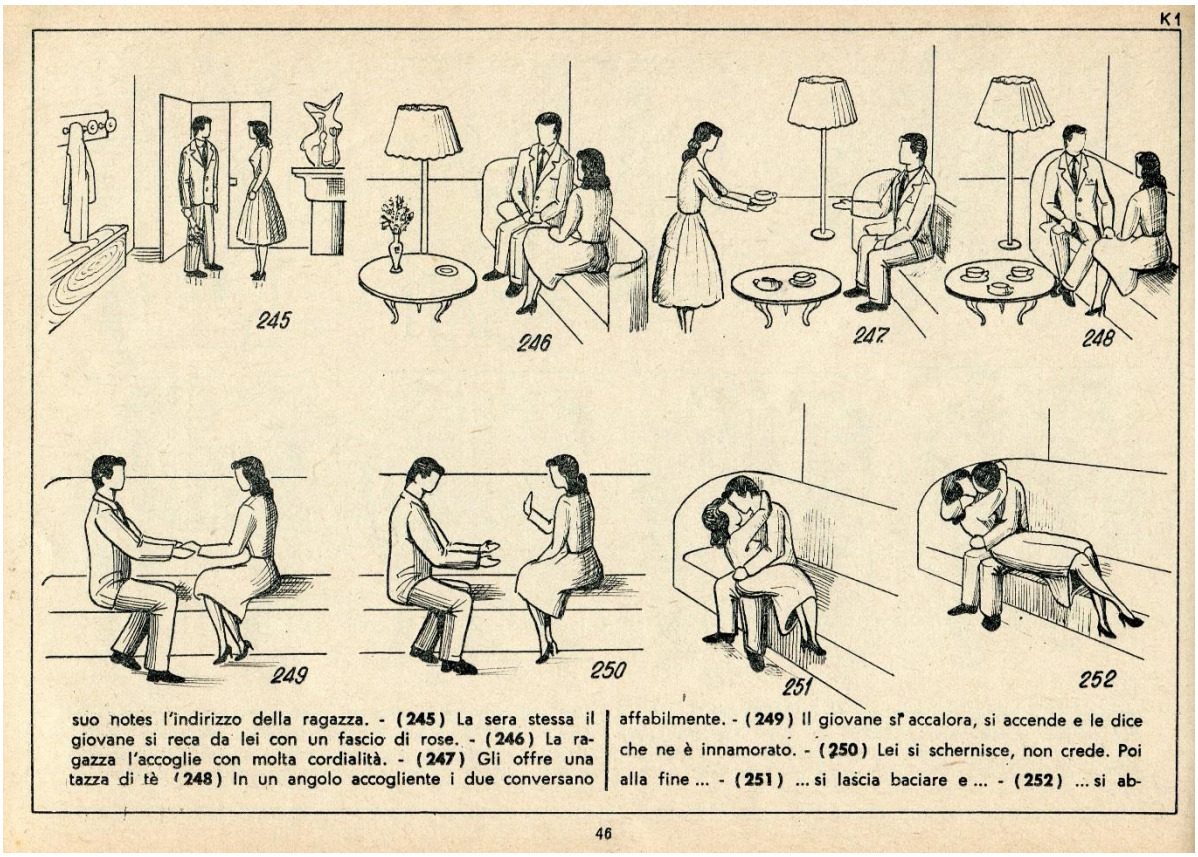

Figure 5

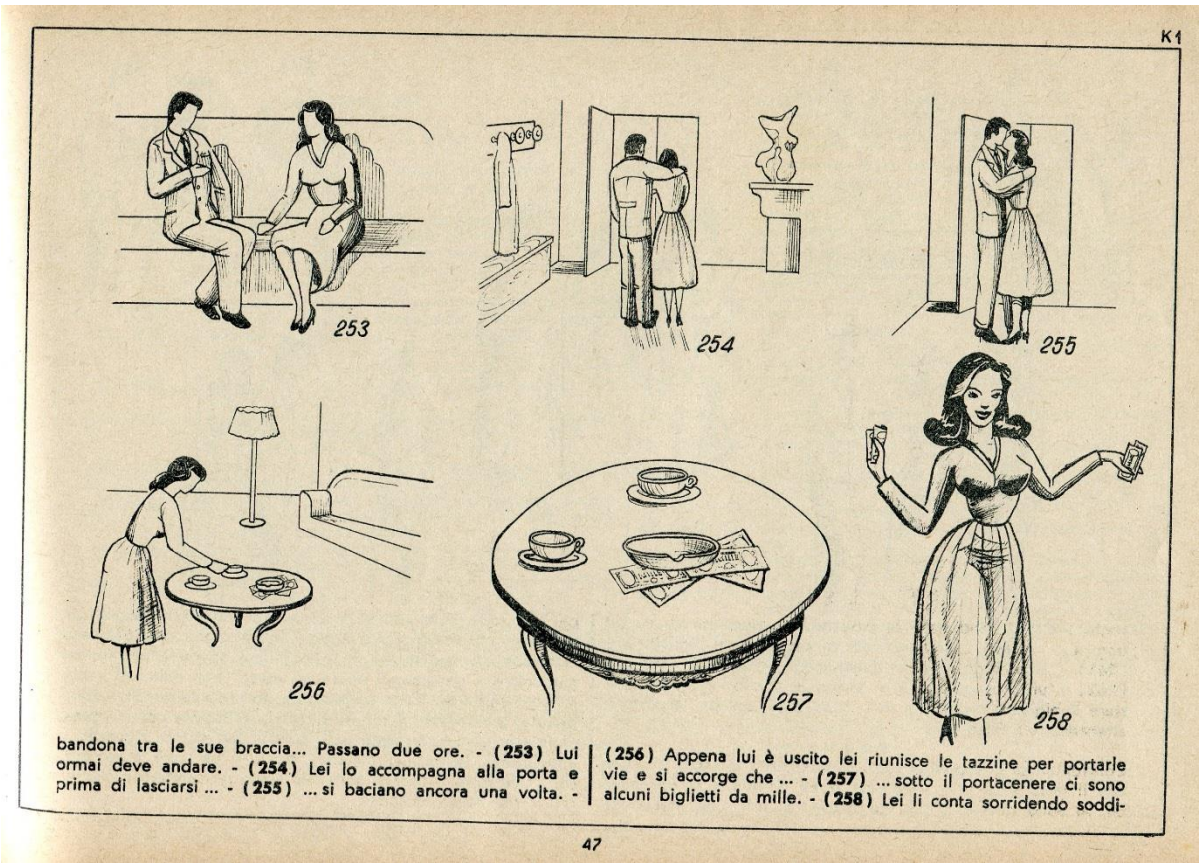

Figure 6

This is clearly a scene showing decent courtship, with clearly defined, almost chivalric codes (the man offers flowers, he kisses very politely, he does not run away after the moments of intimacy). Moreover, what happens between the two pages ("Passano due ore": "two hours go by") is not visually documented: the camera looks elsewhere or rather does not look at all—a very radical and blunt variation on the so-called Hollywood "chimney shot". Yet, the closing sequence introduces a totally new element: money. After the man has left, the woman discovers under the ash-tray a certain number of 1000 lire banknotes.[13] Does this mean prostitution? Does it refer to some kind of abuse? The patriarchal undertone of this scene is undeniable, but at the same time it is too easy an explanation to decode this scene as the polite and physically non-violent version of the old "sex for food" bond between man and woman; the latter, by the way, is shown as an independent person: she lives on her own and the meeting is not arranged by a third person.[14] A brief comparison with the typical content matter of the 1950s Italian *melò*, as described for instance by Emiliano Morreale in his quasi-encyclopedic study of the genre, helps understand that something else may be at stake.[15] Rather than basic and crude patriarchism, what appears in a scene like this is a more positive and friendly example of the increasing importance of the gift economy in postwar Italy, where the mere act of giving is a key instrument in the social and economic inclusion of the other. A similar situation appears in a famous 1953 "pink" Neo-Realist movie, *Pane, amore, e fantasia* (Luigi Comencini, 1953), also very successful in its photo novel format, where the movie's protagonist, a middle-aged marshal of the *carabinieri* (Vittorio De Sica) eager to marry tries to date a young peasant girl (Gina Lollobrigida) before falling in love with the village midwife (Marisa Merlini). When visiting the young girl's home, the marshal is struck by the honest poverty (a crucial melodramatic cliché) of the girl who spurns him and decides to leave unnoticed a 5000 lire banknote.[16] Unlike Jacobelli's isolated fragment, the money scene in Comencini's movie is part of a larger plot, where the gift will have many funny and softly satirical after effects.

When a similar scene returns in the handbook, in a chapter on how to use captions and speech balloons, the beginning and the end remain the same (when he enters the apartment, the man offers flowers; when he has left, the woman discovers five banknotes on the table), but the central part (the kissing) has been dropped.[17] The moral of the story is now much more down-to-earth: instead of feeling surprised and happy, as

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[13] According to the online conversion tool from ISTAT (vide supra), 1000 lire in 1956 are more or less equivalent to 14,50 euros today.

[14] It of course cannot be denied that there is a strong erotic tension in this page, as suggested by a curious shift in drawing technique: in the last panel the woman is drawn in a much more detailed and attractive manner, and together with the emphasis on her dynamic bodily movements, she becomes as close to a film diva as it is possible to do in the context of a handbook whose drawings respect most constraints of storyboard drawings.

[15] Emiliano Morreale, *Cosi piangevano*, o.c.

[16] According to the online conversion tool from ISTAT (vide supra), 5000 lires in 1956 is equal to 80 euros today.

[17] Jacobelli 1956, p. 86.

in the sequence above, the woman is now making clear to the audience what she thinks of the man's behavior (fig. 7). Actually, she doesn't ask any questions at all, she just feels fine with this unforeseen good luck.

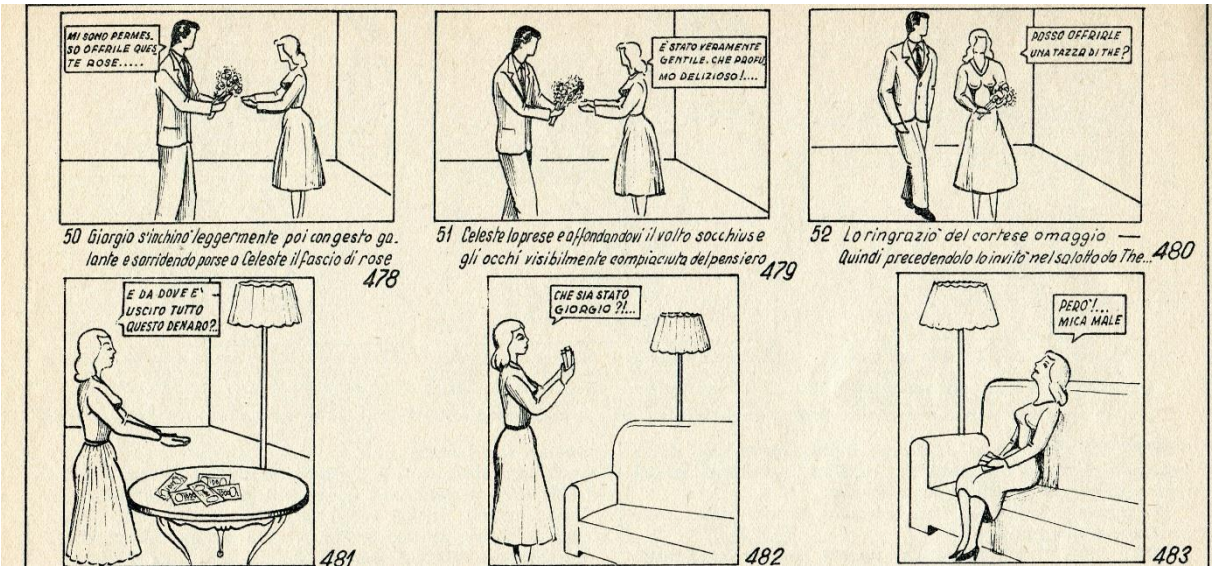

Figure 7 (transl. "But where is this money coming from? / Could that have been Giorgio? / Well, not bad!")

To interpret the subject matter of a story proves more difficult than to make sense of the formal differences between the imagined photo novels in Jacobelli and real photo novels as they actually appeared in magazines. The *Istruzioni* seem to shy away from the typical content of the real photo novel (melodrama, excessive passions, escapism, etc.), but its attempt to foreground an almost completely asepticized version of the photo novel, apparently reduced to a technique of visually documenting banal scenes of daily life, once in a while happens to disclose deeply rooted social aspirations and societal changes, which bring it back to where it does not really want to belong, namely the fantasy world of the photo novel which is more real than we sometimes think it is. What Jacobelli's strange handbook also discloses, is the possible tension between the institutional constraints imposed by the collective authorship of the genre, where the commissioning magazines determine which kind of story should be told and how this is supposed to be executed, and the inevitable input of the actual makers of the photo novel, whose often informal training and personal background are not supposed to interfere with the expectations of the magazines. Hereby Jacobelli suggests that there may be a gap between these two worlds.