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Framing War: Teaching (with) the Graphic Novel *The Photographer*

As early as 1995, Art Spiegelman claimed that "it seems to me that comics have already shifted from being an icon of illiteracy to becoming one of the last bastions of literacy. If comics have any problem now, it's that people don't even have the patience to decode comics at this point" (Groth 1995, 61). Indeed, comics and graphic novels can be complex and intricate texts that demand the reader's full attention in order to be adequately understood, something that makes them suitable for teaching literacy: they combine different modes – most obviously images and written language – that do not only illustrate each other, but also complement, comment on or even contradict each other. Readers, therefore, have to pay attention to the various elements – modes, as will be explained further down – in order to make graphic novels meaningful, which means that using them in the classroom offers a wealth of opportunities to hone students' analytical skills. The fact that such texts reflect the increasingly complex media and communication landscape of today – e.g. the multimodal character of digital technology such as the internet – is a further advantage in using them for teaching.

In the following, I analyze *The Photographer* (2009), focusing on the way that its multimodal character helps to create and shape possible readings in decisive ways which would not have been possible had any of the involved modes been used alone. Complementing but also contradicting each other, the modes of photography, drawing, and written text, together with color and graphic elements, represent the tireless efforts of the Doctors without Borders initiative in Afghanistan in 1986 while at the same time reflecting on the problems involved in such a representation. While modes come with specific advantages that we tend to take for granted, their combination helps to highlight what one could call their limitations and shortcomings, which makes *The Photographer* an ideal text to both teach reading and analytical competences and reflect on a meta-level on such meaning-making processes. Before I turn to my analysis, I briefly define and discuss the terms multimodality, mode and literacy, providing working definitions suitable for my analysis. Framing my reading with a sketch of how *The Photographer* came into being as well as a brief look at genre and its implications, I then turn to selected passages of the graphic novel to show how a multimodal approach might not just help students to arrive at a more complex reading but also serve as a critical reflection on its representational strategies. I close with suggestions on how to work with *The Photographer* in the classroom.

Multimodality and Multiliteracy

Multimodality is a field that has virtually exploded in the last decade, growing in reach from its beginnings in the field of linguistics and semiotics to be adopted and adapted by other disciplines, such as literature, film and media studies.¹ While its use and theoretical conceptualization vary widely across disciplines, multimodality in its

1 See Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran (2016) for a good overview of major strands of multimodal theory.

widest sense suggests that people "communicate in a variety of ways" (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran 2016, 1), using multiple modes at the same time. For my purposes here, I understand a mode with Gunther Kress as "a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning" (2010, 79), such as drawing, photography, writing, layout, speech etc. In other words, how modes are used in meaning making and how they are understood can vary across cultures and can change over time. Modes are different from media in that the latter are material, physical resources or technologies, such as printed books, e-books or DVDs, which are used to disseminate texts that consist of one or more modes (Serafini 2014, 15). Each mode comes with "affordances," i.e. with possibilities and limitations regarding meaning-making, which are based on both its material characteristics (e.g. sound in music, film, or speech) and on what Kress calls the "social work" performed by members of social or cultural groups with those modes (2010, 80) and the conventions this work produces. Accordingly, different modes offer different possibilities for meaning production with some modes being more suited to communicate certain things in a certain situation than others. This does not mean, however, that one mode – e.g. written language – is generally 'better' than others. Particularly the latter point is important here since it is the written language mode that has been favored for so long in classroom settings, something that is increasingly challenged (Serafini 2014, 17). As particularly the growing importance of digital technologies has made obvious, we live in a world in which people routinely have to deal with multimodal texts such as websites, which combine, for instance, sound, moving and still images, written language, layout, and color.² Consequently, educators have adapted the notion of literacy, which emphasized the importance of the written language at the expense of other modes, and are now using terms like visual or media literacy or, even more comprehensively, multimodal literacy (Serafini 2014; see also Kress 2003) to widen the focus, which is an important aspect for the classroom.

Hence, if multiliteracy – a critical literacy that extends beyond the written language to other modes used in the production of meaning – is important for the classroom, so is the concept of multimodality as it helps guide our analytical focus to all modes that any given text features. For my analysis of *The Photographer* – a multimodal text par excellence – I adapt the social semiotic approach to multimodality developed, among others, by Kress (2010). Not only does it consider that and how modes are socially and culturally shaped and thus changing, but it also considers both producers and readers of meaning as active agents, rather than passive users of conventional sign systems. Moreover, Kress also puts forth the notion of the "motivated sign," which means that the sign's components – form and meaning – "stand in a 'motivated' relation," not a random one (2010, 10). People decide what kind of form they use, i.e. signs are "the expression of the *interest* of socially formed individuals" (Kress 2010, 10). While this might seem like a minor, even an obvious point, I think that it is important because it highlights that, as Kress states, modes are not just 'given,' but they are "shaped by the practices of members of social groups and their cultures" (Kress 2010, 10). Participation in this shaping of modes and meaning-

2 Referring to the current focus on multimodal research, Stock, for instance, has talked about the "discovery of the obvious" (qtd. in Serafini 2014, 15) since we have always lived surrounded by multimodal texts.

making is a powerful tool, which makes it all the more important to ensure that the participants critically reflect upon their own and others' usage of said modes.

Framing War in *The Photographer*: Genres, Contexts, Modes

The Photographer uses a wide range of modes, and these modes rely on both convention and its disruption in the way they co-create and express meaning. Although it is an account of Didier Lefèvre's experience of a Doctors Without Borders/ Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) mission into Afghanistan in 1986, it is a co-production of several people. During the mission, Didier Lefèvre took over 4,000 photographs, only six of which were published after his return.³ One of his friends, the graphic novelist Emmanuel Guibert, helped turn Lefèvre's memories of that mission into the graphic novel, which contains Lefèvre's photos together with drawings and a written narrative by Emmanuel Guibert.⁴ The graphic designer Frédéric Lemerrier did the coloring and Alexis Siegel, who translated the novel, wrote an introduction for the English edition, which provides the mission's socio-political contexts and comments on the novel as well as the history of its creation. In contrast to the French version, published in three different volumes from 2003 to 2006, the English version was published in 2009 as a complete volume featuring three different parts.⁵ Although Guibert says in an interview that he tried to recreate the situation in which Lefèvre showed him his photographs while providing an oral commentary for them (Fitzgerald 2010, n.p.), the drawings and the written text have more than simply an illustrative function as I will show in the following. In addition to the interaction of the different modes, the various genres that the book draws on provide an additional framework for reading it.

First of all – as the cover's subtitle "Into War-torn Afghanistan with Doctors without Borders" suggests – *The Photographer* is a documentary of the work done by that organization, which provides medical help in underdeveloped regions that often suffer from the effects of war and other violent conflicts all over the globe; it is an eye-witness account of the situation in northern Afghanistan during the conflict between the Soviet Union and the mujahedeen. Moreover, and going hand-in-hand with this aspect, the novel could be called a memoir, an autobiographical account from the point of view of a professional photographer; in this sense, it goes beyond the documentation of a humanitarian mission, containing also a more personalized account of somebody traveling in Afghanistan for the first time. Thirdly, it can be considered as graphic journalism, a genre that has become increasingly popular as a way to report on and document political hotspots. Finally, *The Photographer* can be considered a travel narrative, even a sort of ethnography, recounting a (Western) traveler's experience of a foreign, 'exotic' country and culture (Chiu 2014). All these genres combine and – to a certain extent – contest each other, thus providing a complex narrative about both an individual's journey and a humanitarian mission,

3 These photos were published on a double-spread page in the newspaper *Libération* (27-28 December 1986), a success according to Guibert. However, Guibert thought that the photos as well as Lefèvre's story deserved to be circulated more widely and suggested their collaboration on a graphic novel (Fitzgerald 2010, n.p.).

4 Guibert's recordings of these sessions (together with selected photographs) are available on <<http://lephotographe.dupuis.com/site.html>> (last accessed 30 January 2018).

5 If not otherwise noted, all quotations come from the English edition with page numbers in brackets.

which on the one hand is framed by the region's socio-political situation and its global ties (particularly pertinent in the future role of Osama Bin Laden) and, on the other hand, by its reflections on the mechanisms and implications of that very representation. While the black and white photographs are a long-standing staple of the documentary genre, being – by association and convention – a visual expression of the seriousness and 'objectivity' of the given account, they also bring a certain aesthetic quality to the text, interweaving the sober documentation of the consequences of war with a hauntingly beautiful portrayal of the Afghan landscape, the culture, and its people. The drawn images both tie in with the objectivity and truthfulness of the documentary genre and also undercut its effect: In focusing on Didier and situations in which he either could not or would not take any photographs, they complete his narrative; yet, they also bring a very personal element to the account (after all, they are hand-drawn), reminding the reader of the fact that documentary texts, although trying to be objective, always necessarily contain a subjective element with regard to the person who experiences and documents the events.⁶ The personal element is also part of the genres of the memoir and the travel narrative. Frequently, Didier's eye-witness account of the mission turns into a more subjective view of his feelings and thoughts, something that becomes particularly obvious in Didier's comments about the ways in which he experiences the Afghan people and their culture. Hence, the novel is not just an 'official' documentation of the mission but also documents Didier's more personal experiences and the ways in which he deals with the difficult journey. In some parts, *The Photographer* contains typical elements of the colonialist and stereotypical views frequently found in travel narratives (cf. Chiu 2014), a genre in which travelers, often from the West, narrate their experiences gained in encountering foreign cultures. This western view on such cultures often turns into a controlling and evaluating look, which posits the foreign culture as 'other,' incomprehensible and even inferior. *The Photographer* displays a number of such stereotypical perspectives, e.g. when Didier frequently links his perception of the native population (as appearing unfriendly) with an instant evaluation (as not trustworthy; e.g. 39, 45). Yet, Didier's western gaze is undercut by other aspects, such as the fact that it is he who is different and stands out, not being able to speak the Afghan language and not knowing anything about local customs and traditions. The combination of a more personalized view on an event with the genre of ('objective') reporting, which can be found here, is a characteristic of the genre of graphic journalism, a branch of journalism that has especially come to the fore with the growing popularity of both the graphic novel and the internet as a place to spread the news.⁷ Used not so much for topical news than for long-term reporting, graphic journalism has become ever more important, providing a very different way of reporting that also seems to attract a new kind of readership (Rall et al. 2013, 351f.; 361). As a term, graphic journalism used to refer to the additional use of graphics to

6 In the following, I will make a distinction between the author and the narrator of the novel, using Lefèvre when referring to the former and Didier when referring to the latter.

7 Since Joe Sacco and his graphic journalistic work on Palestine and Yugoslavia, among others, the genre of graphic journalism has risen in popularity, which can also be seen in the fact that magazines and journals were created as an outlet for that kind of work (Orbán 2015, 124). For a definition and discussion of the genre see Schack (2014); Rall et al. (2013).

illustrate points made in the text; more and more, however, the term comes to designate the integration of drawn images in the tradition of the comic, used to highlight and narrate events in ways that photos or written text on their own cannot. *The Photographer* also features such a combination of written text and graphic images in addition to photos in order to narrate the MSF mission from a variety of perspectives, which hints at the intertwining of the objective and the personal and thus complicates any simple notion of journalistic truth.

Situating *The Photographer* with regard to its genre contexts and provenience already hints at the cultural work it performs as it draws on, critically comments on, and thus rewrites these traditions of representation. A good introduction into the novel's multimodality is its cover since it makes visible the different modes and their interaction. The cover contrasts a drawing of the photographer – Didier – with a picture he took of one of the Afghan men safely guiding the MSF mission to Afghanistan. The act of taking a picture is contrasted with its result in at least two different ways: the opposition of two image-based modes – drawing and photography – is taken up by the color scheme: toned down, earth-based colors, used throughout for the drawings, and the black and white aesthetics of Lefèvre's photographs. These two images are connected by a dark red line, which mirrors the red pencil marks which appear on many of the photographs in the novel. In fact, these markings visualize the selection process involved in putting together this graphic novel: They are the traces left by Lefèvre when reviewing his archive of photos from Afghanistan, marking the pictures that are in his view particularly suited to document the mission. The red line, then, fittingly links the process of taking the picture with the photograph itself, providing a visual reminder of the fact that these photographs stand at the end of a long process that goes from traveling to taking the picture to making a selection in the end. The contrast between the drawing and the photograph visualizes yet another aspect implied in representational strategies, namely the contrast between looking and being looked at and, relevant in this context, between the person who represents and the subject that is being represented. However, this contrast between active looking and passive being-looked-at is complicated further. Not only is the act of looking mediated by the camera, which might serve as a reminder that representation is not 'the real thing' but involves processes of mediation; the Afghan man we look at returns our gaze by looking back at us, disrupting the somewhat unidirectional notion of looking and reminding us that he has his own point of view, which might get lost in the process of representation.⁸ Thus, one could say, even the graphic novel's cover takes part in the book's reflection on the politics of representation, i.e. the various decisions involved in such a process. This combination of drawing and photograph, divided and connected by the red line, is complemented by another mode, written language. First of all, there is the book's title, *The Photographer*, appropriately printed across the lower third of the drawing depicting the photographer, who is usually not in the picture, thus suggesting

8 To remain within the scope of this paper, I do not offer a close reading of the way the Afghan man is photographed; yet it is of course significant that he is shown in a somewhat private moment, huddled into a blanket to get some rest while still having his weapon ready in case the mission is attacked. What is more, the photograph problematizes the equivalence of seeing and knowing as the squatting Afghan covers his body with a blanket, protecting himself from the cold, but maybe also hiding from Russian helicopters – and incidentally shielding his body from the photographer's gaze.

the complementary function of the drawings in this book. The subtitle, printed across the uppermost part of the photo below the drawing, complements this, providing us with the information of where the photographer went and what his photos will be about: "Into War-Torn Afghanistan with *Doctors Without Borders*." Hence, title and subtitle add to the information given in the visual modes, making it more concrete. In addition, the last names of the novel's three authors are given in the upper left corner, in the color of the red line. Again, this is an appropriate link since it highlights who the people are that brought us the selection of photographs, the drawings, the written language narrative and dialogues as well as the colors that make up the graphic novel. Finally, a praise by famous actor and UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie as well as the simple information "A *New York Times* Bestseller" round off the cover, functioning as strategic advertisement to help sell the book.

The rather complex implications that are part of the act of representation are negotiated throughout *The Photographer*. As discussed above, the novel is not simply a documentation or a graphic journalistic report; at the same time, it is also not merely a memoir capturing an individual's (travel) experience. Hired by MSF to document their mission into Afghanistan in order to generate more funding and resources for their work, Lefèvre's task to provide an objective, documentary visual account is emphasized from the very beginning (Siegel 2009). Yet, the impossibility of such an endeavor is also made clear from the very beginning, mainly, I would argue, by the different modes utilized in the novel and the ways in which they work together. The English edition starts with an introduction written by its translator Alexis Siegel and ends with the epilogue "Portraits," which features photos and brief written passages about the most important characters and how they fared after the mission.⁹ Together, they provide an adequate frame for the graphic novel: In framing it, the introduction and portrait section 'close off' the book, setting it apart as a special, noteworthy moment in time while at the same time linking it with the larger history of global affairs, showing how the mission, and especially its active agents, have a significance that goes beyond the novel.

The written introduction, featuring some of the images from the narrative proper, situates the graphic novel with regard to its historic, socio-political, and cultural contexts, highlighting, among other things, how the developments in Afghanistan in the 1980s are connected to our current moment, i.e. the post-9/11 war on terror. Moreover, Siegel's introduction also comments on the mission and Lefèvre's role in documenting it. For instance, he states that Lefèvre's memory is inaccurate with regard to certain facts he recalls (vii), thus revealing something that the interaction of the different modes also emphasizes, namely the limits of representation in terms of objectivity and truth. Despite the apparently objective nature of the photographic documents and the fact that the narrative is based on Didier's own, first-hand experience, the account of the mission can still be inaccurate, particularly since it depends on memory (rather than, say, written notes).¹⁰ More importantly, the photographs remain the same, even as our reading changes, guided as it is by the

9 The French publication does not have an introduction; it also has a cover different from the English edition.

10 Similarly, the epilogue reveals that Lefèvre's written notes about the mission went missing, providing a further indication that the way he recalls certain events might not be entirely accurate.

different versions of the written narrative, Didier's and Alexis Siegel's respectively, showing how meaning is co-produced by the different modes.

Appropriately, the transition from the introduction to the graphic novel proper is made via a double-page spread featuring two different maps that visualize the geographical location of the mission. Yet, here too, the graphic novel seems to take up the issue of representation in providing us with hand-drawn maps, which come with very different connotations than 'official' topographic, political or physical maps in that they openly disrupt notions of accuracy or objectivity. In fact, their simplicity – a few black lines and place names on an otherwise empty background – helps to orient readers only very roughly in the triangle of Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Beyond a few of the key locations of the mission (e.g. Peshawar, Chitral, or Feyzabad), readers are not given any further information. Nevertheless, the hand-drawn maps send us on our way to the mission, a transition that is mirrored by the beginning of the actual narrative, which starts with Didier's journey from his home in France to Peshawar, where he meets the MSF team.

Multimodality at Work: *The Photographer* and the Reflection of Representation

Before entering into a more detailed discussion of the modes and their various forms of interaction, I want to comment briefly on how the images are rendered visually (coloring, layout etc.). With one exception – a picture taken with someone else's camera (91) – all photographs are black and white, printed from film roles. Rather unusual for a photo book, the majority of photographs is only slightly enlarged with a considerable number of them even printed as contact sheets, i.e. small prints the size of photo negatives used to get a first impression of a picture's quality. These contact prints give additional information that enlargements usually do not have, namely the film roll's brand and identifying numbers, i.e. the order in which pictures were taken. In the case of *The Photographer*, these contact prints frequently emphasize the fact that images are part of a larger series taken at the same time and place rather than their unique quality. Strikingly, both the contact prints and the slightly enlarged images fit "with deceptive ease" into the comic book format as they are reminiscent of panels (Orbán 2015, 132). In this way, photographic prints and the drawn panels alternate almost seamlessly in terms of form and size, emphasizing that the story is narrated by both modes working together. This is underlined by the use of color. Different color schemes are used, yet the toned-down, earthy color palette used in the drawings fits well to the black and white of the photos. Moreover, color helps to consistently distinguish between Didier's first-person narration given in the captions (black lettering in pale yellow boxes) and the dialogues rendered as speech balloons (black lettering, white background).

However, there is another use of color that is more disruptive. Bright red pencil markings appear throughout the book, marking selected photographs.¹¹ Making visible the photographer's practice of selection by singling out suitable photos, the red color frequently disrupts the narrative. Not only do the markings sometimes obstruct

11 Some of the marked photos are printed as enlargements in the novel (e.g. 73f.), others might have been used elsewhere (e.g. 44, the 'crossed out' photo of Najmudin, which was one of the photos printed in *Libération* (Philip 1986, 15).

our actual view of the photo in question; they also remind us of the process of selection involved in narration, namely what to include and what to leave out. On a different level, these markings address notions of suitability and representativeness (which photo most fittingly represents an event, a person?) involved in documentary practices and narration in general. This is underlined by the way in which both photographs and drawings are arranged on the page. Rather than being accurately positioned, the photos frequently overlap and are sometimes cut off at the margins of the page. Again, such an arrangement emphasizes selection and fragmentation: These photos, as the layout makes clear, are partial, part of a larger narrative that can only be represented in parts, from individual perspectives, and never as a complete – and completely true – whole. In contrast, the hand-drawn images are very accurately placed, straight, orderly, and always completely visible. If there is any overlap, it is the drawings (including the boxes containing the written captions) that are set on top of the photographs, an arrangement that seems to give added significance, even precedence (in accuracy, in truth?) to the drawings and the written narration.¹² Such an arrangement visualizes that the different modes used to document the mission should always be seen as working together; only together are they an adequate account of the mission. Such an emphasis on the incomplete, fragmentary nature of narration and representation is matched by the different ways multimodality works in the novel, which I will discuss in the following.

The novel's opening sequence shows us how the modes in general work together to create the narrative (3-6). The captions provide the autodiegetic narrator's account of the journey; since they accompany the images, both the black and white photographs and the earth-colored drawings, they serve as a voice-over, providing us with information that we cannot infer by looking at the images alone. The photographs function as 'transparent' representations, snapshots of people and places Didier has seen, stipulating an authenticity that is reinforced by the long-standing notion of photography as truthful simply because it seems to represent reality mechanically, precisely as it is (cf. e.g. Sontag 2008, 6). The drawings, in contrast, seem more 'subjective' simply because they are hand-drawn, which stresses the fact that they are 'mediated,' and more abstract, giving us fewer details than the photographs. Yet, they reveal something the photos cannot as they show us the events, places, and people that the photographer could not capture on film, such as the taking-off of his plane or his meeting a member of the MSF team at the airport. A striking example of this is a passage from the second part of the novel, in which Didier accompanies John, a doctor who examines a villager's daughter who "hasn't gotten up since the bombing" (133). As it turns out, a tiny piece of shrapnel ruptured her spinal cord, meaning that "she'll never walk again" (135). No photos are shown in this sequence since it was too dark to take any pictures; again, drawings supply the scene visually. They are rendered in dark colors from which only the girl stands out since she is highlighted by a pale yellow. While this kind of coloring is certainly realistic as it represents the lighting conditions, it is also symbolic in its reflection of the girl's light figure against the

12 See Schack (2014, 114 f.), who regards the text-image combination as a putting together of "contextual and historical aspects of story" with the "visceral" impact that the images, particularly the photos have. See also Orbán (2015, 133), who distinguishes between the graphic narrative (drawn images and verbal text), which provide context and propel the story forward, and the photographs.

'dark,' terrible fate and the gruesome consequences of war. The mode of drawing, here, complements the photographic one while also undercutting the latter's claim to objectivity and truth simply by highlighting photography's limitations. Our reading of the visual modes is further guided by the written language narration (cf. Sontag 2008, 23), a personal account based on Didier's memory, which underlines the subjective (and also potentially unreliable) nature of this documentary effort. Hence, meaning is created by the interaction of the different modes, a processual, multimodal production of meaning that becomes more than the sum of its single parts.

In addition to the work of complementation and contrast, there are other ways in which the different modes interact. In a number of sequences, the modes, most notably drawings and photos, mirror each other almost exactly. In a sequence in which Didier asks Robert about his motivation to be part of the mission, a series of photos shows slightly different shots of the latter smoking and talking (146f.) accompanied by captions that render what Robert says. The sequence ends with a drawing of Robert that mirrors the photos exactly, from the cigarette smoke to the pattern visible on the wall behind Robert. While the drawing reinforces – by way of a speech balloon – that this sequence is about Robert's experience, it is also a subtle way of reminding the readers that the drawings are on a par with the photos concerning what one could call the potential for representation, particularly in terms of accuracy and truth.¹³ Similar pairings of photos and drawings can be found throughout the graphic novel, reinforcing the reliability of the drawings and pulling the modes more closely together.¹⁴ In a different use of such pairings yet another function becomes visible. In some of these pairings, the drawings function as guides to how we should read a certain photo, i.e. they help focus our attention on the relevant aspects by, for instance, blending out distracting or irrelevant details. In other words, while they do not add anything on a visual level (actually they take away something), they supply necessary information on how to read a photo (e.g. 63, 68).

Despite the novel's emphasis on what one could call the "modal equivalence" of photographs and drawings in terms of accuracy or truth, many sequences exploit the long-standing notion of photographic objectivity. Thus, a number of photographs are used to supply visual evidence for things narrated in the other modes. A case in point are the passages in which Didier shows the actual work of the MSF. While captions provide the kind of information the pictures cannot easily give – who the patient is or what he or she suffers from –, the photos document the precarious conditions under which MSF has to work. Thus, the makeshift 'hospital' MSF sets up in Zaragandara is shown in a photograph, a small, unimpressive shack-like structure which seems utterly unfit – to western eyes – to house even a small sick room (101f.). Here, one could say, the adage that pictures speak louder than words becomes particularly clear as the visualization of the inadequate conditions drives home the point better than

13 See Pedri (2011, n.p.), who argues that such a repetition works against the danger of desensitization that comes by repeated exposure to the same photographs.

14 In an earlier passage in which Didier voices his admiration for the members of MSF speaking Afghan Persian, the relation between drawing and photo is reversed. A drawing shows Robert's face, with beard and hat, while the caption comments that he could not be "closer to the real thing [a local person] – the look, the attitudes, the fluency with the language" (17). The following photograph shows two men that virtually look alike (except for a difference in height), reinforcing what the earlier image already showed us, namely that Robert is almost indistinguishable from an Afghan local.

words can, particularly since the images are photographs. Moreover, and this becomes visible in a number of other passages that illustrate patients' treatments, the photographs really visualize the war's terrible effects on the Afghan population, from a man with a bullet wound (106f.) to the boy Amrullah, who lost part of his face by shrapnel (119ff.), one of the truly horrifying sequences in the novel. While the narrator's voice explains to us what happened, a half-page photo visualizes in gruesome detail what the boy must go through. The operation performed on the terrace, as the language narration informs us, is depicted in a step-by-step manner as a series of contact prints whose small size makes the whole procedure hardly more bearable (120).

While Lefèvre's photographs are undoubtedly central to the endeavor of appropriately documenting the consequences of war as well as the impressive work of the MSF, they never work alone but always in interaction with the other modes. Yet, there are also passages in which the drawings take over to show us scenes that the photos cannot show us, giving evidence of the frightening and hopeless character of the situation in their very own way. In the novel's third part, for instance, Didier tries to return to Pakistan on his own and there are several sequences with drawings that supply parts of the narrative that the photos cannot. His near-death experience on the Kalotac pass is, for instance, rendered in monochrome drawings that mirror what photos of that scene might have looked like, expressing the lack of visibility and the hopelessness that Didier feels on that mountain pass.

Yet, the narrative ends with photographs. On the penultimate page we can see a photograph of all the film rolls that Didier took during the journey, lined up like "hunting trophies" (259) and again visualizing part of the process that lies behind any photo documentary. This 'portrait' of the film rolls – together with some of the camera equipment – is complemented by the narrative's last page, which shows a complete contact sheet with pictures of Didier's mother taken after his return to France. Again, the photos do not just provide the end of the journey, the arrival 'at home.' They can also be taken as a comment on the practice of photographic journalism (and photography in general), particularly as the contact sheet also gives us an insight into how Didier catalogues his photos: The upper part of the contact sheet provides information on the photos' location and subject ("Maman à Blonville. Retour d'Afghanistan"), date ("Nov. 86"), camera used ("Leica"), and, presumably, which film role ("AF 86. 129"). The last three rows of negatives are blank, indicating that indeed Didier's journey has ended now. Fittingly, at the bottom of the page the three co-authors of the graphic novel, Lefèvre, Guibert, and Lemercier, have left their signature so that the reader is again reminded of the fact that this story has been narrated by multiple voices, from a variety of viewpoints. Additionally, it is also a reminder that photography is neither the only nor even the most important mode in the narration.

The novel relies on interaction between various modes and draws on the different affordances (including readerly connotations) that they come with. What is particularly striking about a novel that draws on genres and traditions such as photojournalism, documentation and (ethnographic) travel writing is that it does not just document or represent an event but reflects on the form and mechanisms necessary for this representation in the very way it is narrated. Thus, it disrupts any assumptions that we might have about authenticity and truth which such documentations usually come

with. However, rather than giving readers the impression of complete unreliability or fictionality that such a questioning might generate, the graphic novel seems to gain an even greater validity as it openly draws attention to the pitfalls of (any) representation. It is its complex stance regarding practices of representation that makes it particularly suitable for teaching multiliteracy to students, something that I will comment on in the next section.

Teaching (with) *The Photographer*

Since *The Photographer* covers rather complex political and historical developments and because it makes the consequences of war visible in a very literal way, it is best suited for upper level learners of English (11th grade and beyond). Here, however, teachers have a variety of possibilities to approach the novel, which include content and language integrated learning (CLIL) as well as teaching units designed in cooperation with subjects like history and art. Even weaker learners of English can profit from reading the novel as the various non-verbal modes can help them understand the story and might actually help to boost their English language skills. And while there are certainly many comics or graphic novels suitable for the EFL classroom, *The Photographer* seems particularly fitting as it does not simply tell a story in a very obviously multimodal way but also reflects on potentially problematic aspects of representation.

Before the graphic novel is approached, students should be familiarized with basic comic terminology as well as the specific characteristics of graphic narratives. Here, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is an invaluable introduction for teachers and students alike. However, as it might be too long for assigning it in the classroom, teachers could introduce concepts and terms by discussing a number of different, shorter comic strips or excerpts from graphic novels before starting with *The Photographer*.¹⁵ To familiarize students with the function of gutters and the order of panels, for instance, an ordering task (pair work) works quite well: Here, students are given the panels from a short cartoon (4-6 panels) and asked to rearrange them in an order that makes narrative sense. Once they have put the panels in sequence, they present their order together with the reasons for ordering them in a particular way. Ordering their panels and comparing different solutions leads students to think about the 'sequential' character of comic panels, the function of gutters as well as how readers have to pay attention to both visual and verbal cues to read a comic. To focus on the interaction between verbal and visual cues, it might be a good idea to have students complete a comic strip from which all written language (captions, speech balloons) has been removed. Again, students should not only present their ideas but also give reasons for what they have done. How and why do the captions and the dialogue fit the image and the visual narrative given in the panels? What kind of cues did they get from the images? Of course, the point of both tasks is not to arrive at the 'correct' solution (i.e. the one given in the original) but to arrive at a solution that makes sense and fits the rest of the comic. Both tasks are a playful way to have students think about the way in which comics narrate their stories and, particularly, how verbal and

15 For a succinct introduction to graphic storytelling and terminology see Rudiger (2006); Ludwig (2014).

visual modes work together.¹⁶ Moreover, basic terms such as gutter, captions or speech balloon – if not already known to students – can be easily introduced.

In a next step, students have a closer look at visual styles, layout, colors etc. In this phase, the class can be divided into groups, which are given the beginning sequence (ca. 1-4 pages) of different graphic novels with the task to analyze them in terms of style (depending on the level of the class, the teacher can give additional cues as to what students should focus on). Choosing the beginning of a graphic novel (rather than, say, a key scene) has the advantage that comprehension due to lack of information about the plot is not an issue, and it comes with the added bonus of making students curious about what will follow next, the best incentive to interest them in reading further. There is a large number of great graphic novels to choose from and hence, it is not difficult to come up with examples that are visually different. The crime scene in the opening pages of Alan Moore's and Dave Gibbon's classic *Watchmen*, for example, is drawn in a rather 'realistic' style, in which color is used to distinguish between the present and speculations about the past. Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* also uses color, yet comes in a very different, more iconic drawing style that focuses on (stereo)typical characteristics of people (hair, skin), thus highlighting that racist distinctions rely on predominantly visible characteristics. In contrast, Vera Brosgol's *Anya's Ghost* is produced in grayish colors and uses food or clothing to signify ethnic difference. No matter which examples are chosen for this group work, it is important to familiarize students with such differences in style as well as their function. Moreover, it is a good opportunity to introduce students to the advanced terminology with which they can describe graphic elements.

Based on the overview that students have gained by looking at a variety of different comic examples, they are now prepared to delve into *The Photographer*. A good pathway into the book is a discussion of its cover as it not only visualizes the modes and style in which it is rendered but hints at its topic (MSF, Afghanistan). Issues such as (documentary) photography, photographic truth (based on the black and white photograph), the genres (documentation, travelogue), co-authorship or the power of looking might also already be discussed, depending on what students come up with in their descriptions. This stage would also be good for a discussion of the genre of documentary and, more particularly, documentary photography, including such vexed issues as objectivity and truth. Depending on what students already know, this discussion could be based on their knowledge or on information researched as homework. If students have not yet read the graphic novel, the teacher could also ask for their expectations, which might not just raise interest in the novel but also activate previous knowledge and ideas helpful for reading it. Thus having opened up the field of perspectives with which one can look at and read *The Photographer*, the class can turn to the introduction by Alexis Siegel. Upper-level classes could be assigned to read the introduction as a homework assignment, weaker classes might need more help, such as a division into shorter reading assignments, vocabulary explanations or fact sheets about the war in Afghanistan. The introduction is a necessary way into the

16 If comic strips about well-known characters are chosen (e.g. Peanuts or Calvin and Hobbes), students probably also draw on their own background knowledge when they work on their task, something that can also be reflected upon in the discussion, making the interaction between text and reader in the process of interpretation even more obvious.

novel as it contextualizes it with regard to its historic, cultural, and postcolonial implications; moreover, as discussed above, it provides an explanation of how the novel was conceived and written, including the fact that its narrator Didier relied on his memory and therefore did not necessarily get everything right.

To tackle the novel, students should keep a reading log, in which they keep track of the events and, particularly for selected scenes, the various modes and their function.¹⁷ Again, having students work on the first couple of pages on their own in order to share what they found out (e.g. in a think, pair, share approach) is a good method as the first scene already makes obvious how the modes work, on their own and together. Further reading assignments (as homework) can help structure the novel into smaller bits. The teacher can then decide which sequences the class should discuss, depending on what the objective and interest here is. Alternatively, the teacher could also ask students to think about scenes and sequences they found particularly striking or impressive; the scenes that students are most interested in can then be integrated into the unit. Advanced students can even be asked to prepare their scene for discussion in class, either by thinking about questions and aspects to be looked at or by giving a brief presentation on what they found striking and why. Since the novel touches on a number of topics, a decision has to be made regarding the focus of the teaching unit: Didier's travel experience in a foreign culture; consequences of war on everyday life; medical care facilities in developing countries and under war conditions etc.

As pointed out in my analysis above, the graphic novel also provides ample opportunity to think critically about practices of representation. The novel's focus, which emphasizes issues such as the limits of individual perception and memory, intercultural communication, photography, eye-witness accounts etc., could even be extended to think about history writing (e.g. about the war in Afghanistan, about the development of terrorism etc.) or news reporting in its different forms (e.g. daily news reports on current events vs. investigative reports; news in different media). Another fruitful focus could be the narrative strategies that *The Photographer* employs, for instance the shift between the first-person point of view – in captions and photographs – and a third-person perspective that becomes visible in the drawings: how does the novel invite us to take over Didier's perspective and when does it provide distance? What would a particular scene look like if somebody else narrated it? Hence, in addition to the analysis of particular sequences, teachers could integrate more creative tasks into the unit. For instance, scenes in which Didier interacts with Afghan people – particularly when he is on his own – lend themselves well to this, and students could be asked to draw and write their own brief comic strips about this. Similarly, the doctors and their patients could become the focus of such a task so that scenes can be narrated from different perspectives. Moreover, students could be asked to add to the graphic novel by writing Didier's (lost) travelogue or by providing a travel blog of his experiences, thus turning the modes of drawing and photography into written language.

In order to end a unit on *The Photographer*, teachers could employ tasks that involve a critical evaluation and appreciation of the novel and its strategies so that students have to draw on their knowledge of particular scenes as well as more generally

17 As a supplement, the teacher could hand out a detailed map with the major locations so that students can – at least roughly – follow Didier's journey.

on its generic characteristics. For this, formats such as book reviews or blurbs are suitable. Larger projects might involve an application of documentary strategies to another topic (a graphic journalistic report on a current, maybe even local event) or an adaptation of the graphic novel (in the form of a screenplay) into a film documentary. A comparison to other reports or documentaries about the war in Afghanistan or even the documentary film that Juliette Fournot made during Didier's travel with the MSF mission can also prove useful since it does not only give us a different point of view but also utilizes other modes than the graphic novel.¹⁸ Options for follow-up units could be a closer look at other non-fictional texts such as news reporting, history texts, political speeches or even further examples of graphic journalism; a comparison to a fictional graphic novel or another form of travel writing is also conceivable.

The Photographer is a complex multimodal narrative that touches upon a variety of objects and draws on a number of different contexts, all of which turns it into a challenging read particularly suited to the upper level EFL classroom. It provides teachers with a variety of options regarding the aspects to be focused on with regard to topics and approaches used to discuss the novel. Moreover, its multimodal character provides not just additional support for weaker students of English; it also helps to further students' multiliteracy, i.e. the ability to comprehend and use visual and verbal modes, a competence that becomes increasingly important in a world of multimodal text formats such as the internet. Finally, the fact that its narrative is interwoven with reflections on representational practices makes it particularly suitable to promote multiliteracy, including a critical assessment of strategies of representation. In this sense, *The Photographer* is not just a complex example of how to 'frame' and document war in an appropriate way but also an extended mediation on representational strategies, i.e. the frames through which we approach the world in our everyday lives.

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18 Unfortunately, to date the DVD only comes with the third volume of the French edition.

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