

THE DRAMATISATION OF PHOTOGRAPHY AS URBAN CARTOGRAPHY IN *SMOKE*

JAVIER FIGUERO ESPADAS (JFIGUERO@CEU.ES)¹

MIGUEL ÁNGEL DE SANTIAGO MATEOS (MASANTI@CEU.ES)²

¹ University San Pablo CEU, España

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
<i>Smoke</i> <i>Urban cartography</i> <i>Documentary</i> <i>photography</i> <i>Film</i> <i>Discourse Analysis</i> <i>Public Espace</i>	<i>A sequence from Smoke (Wayne Wang and Paul Auster, 1995) explores the unique urban cartography created by an amateur photographer using four thousand photographs of the corner of his street, taken from the same spot at the same time. Through filmic and photographic analysis, the mechanisms that structure the narrative are examined, and it is concluded that still images—along with framing, editing and sound—help to generate empathy in the viewer by combining photography as a belated discovery (Campany) and evidence of documentary reality (Barthes).</i>

Received: 12 / 05 / 2026

Accepted: 18 / 08 / 2026

1. Introduction

This article forms part of the work carried out by the university research group (details omitted for peer review).

This research undertakes a cross-sectional, multidisciplinary study bringing together screenplay narrative, film analysis and photographic analysis in order to examine how photographs —still images— contribute to the cinematic story through the deployment of the artistic side of a photographer-storyteller of the urban public space.

Art, and reflection upon it, are significant aspects of *Smoke* (Wang, 1995). The protagonists are a professional writer and an *amateur* photographer. This distinction between professional and amateur is important to the study, since the author does not seem to differentiate or grant greater relevance to the artist depending on which group they belong to. Indeed, it is the amateur artist who ends up teaching lessons about art to the professional writer. Art in this story seeks the essence of life and conveys values that delve into the roots of what it means to be human.

Photography in cinema is understood mainly as the handling of light or as the inspiration for creating a specific production design; however, photographs —the snapshots captured by a camera— can also make a significant contribution to telling the story, advancing the action and shaping the narrative effectively, as in the case at hand.

2. State of the art

The film *Smoke* is based on a story entitled "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story," written by the screenwriter and novelist Paul Auster in 1990 for *The New York Times*. The narrative delves into the world of art, the encounter, the cadence of time and other recurring themes in Auster's work "that obsess him: chance, solitude, the difficulty of knowing others and, at the same time, the need people have for one another" (Cercas, 2003). Here, chance sets the entire story in motion. Solitude gives rise to the encounter between two characters withdrawn into their own worlds, which leads —after an ellipsis— to a singular moment that skilfully deepens the knowledge of the other and makes the encounter intelligible through the acceptance of the cadence of time. All of this thematic material unfolds thanks to the rhythm with which the photographs appear in the sequence.

Wayne Wang, an American director of Chinese origin, and Paul Auster, a writer from New Jersey, are the creators of this story in which the photo-filmic is interwoven to make possible a narrative where the stillness inherent to photography and the movement proper to cinema create a specific temporality determined by the tension between past and present.

The concept of the sequence and its nature is key to this study. The sequence has been discussed —among others— by Field (1995), McKee (2003) and Sánchez-Escalonilla (2014). Author, citing these experts, argues that the two features of the sequence that turn it into a complete narrative unit are its autonomy and the fact that it addresses a relevant conflict. These two dimensions allow the sequence to detach itself from the filmic text —the film— and constitute itself as an independent narrative (2019, p. 270).

Alluding to Barthes, Zúñiga (2023, p. 135) recalls that "every photograph entails a joint double position of reality and of the past. This simple ontological observation reveals that its founding order is referentiality, whose greatest possible reduction is 'ça a été,' 'that has been' (Barthes, p. 120)." Roland Barthes's approach explains how photographs give the story a documentary character that seeks to reveal the reality that once was. As Deleyto states, the photographer's only mission

consists in pressing the shutter and "capturing" that which chance or fate has placed before the lens. It could be said, therefore, that, insofar as the scene can be considered a *mise-en-abîme* expression of the ideology of *Smoke* regarding representation, the film is a realist text. (2000, p. 98)

Reality, in the film, is built from the fragments of the troubled lives of the various characters who pass through the tobacco shop run by Auggie, who always ends up involved in other people's conflicts despite feigning a nonchalance he does not truly possess. His regular customers —but

above all the writer Paul, Sue, Auggie's ex, and the young Rashid— contribute with their stories to shaping a chance-driven reality, which the film replicates in the sequence of photographs as a *mise en abyme*.

While it is true that the documentary aspect is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in all the photographs, it takes on greater prominence in the narrative, as it attempts to grasp reality itself, almost with an ontological aspiration, despite the discovery —and also thanks to it— that arises from the chance of the everyday. This holds even considering the polysemic value of the image and its constant resignification, arising from the multiple interpretations of any viewer who approaches the images under study.

Although it is true, as Deleyto (2000, p. 101) says, that "in *Smoke* the viewer cannot choose when to pause or when to move on to the next image", it is reasonable to state that the director and the film's editors took into account how much time the viewer would need to appreciate the still images.

Therefore, in this process the director uses a twofold approach to the signification of the photographs. On the one hand, that of the photograph itself as medium and support and, on the other, the value granted to it by enhancing or curtailing its possibilities. For example, by speeding up or halting its viewing or, in a deeper sense, by presenting a specific relationship between a character and a photograph, or the script accompanying the viewing, which therefore offers a very specific framework of approach charged with conceptual, artistic and emotional meaning.

3. Objectives and hypotheses

This research aims to analyse the sequence under study, establish its structure from the theory of screenplay narrative, and determine whether it is an autonomous story. Its supposed independence as a filmic text leads us to think that the sequence itself is an example of *mise-en-abyme* of the entire *film*, imitating on a micro scale the forms and themes of the film. This *mise en abyme*, as De la Prida (2021) states, serves to remind the viewer that they are watching a constructed narrative.

The aim is to analyse the photo-filmic dimension of the sequence and to discover how the photographs help to foster *storytelling* through the analysis of framing, movement, editing (duration, rhythm, cuts, transitions) and sound (music, dialogue and effects), in order to understand the possibility of the *punctum* within an imposed temporality.

For Company, the stillness of photography is not a ghost of the past but a pause in the narrative that holds back the movement of the filmic and prompts reflection on the relevance of what is being told. On the final frozen frame of *Los cuatrocientos golpes* (*Les 400 Coups*, François Truffaut, 1959), Company comments: "In that frozen image an abyss opens between the simplicity of what is seen and the complexity of what it may mean" (2008, p. 57). In the sequence we study, we seek the narrative and the background of the snapshots through their formal choices.

We start from three hypotheses that seem plausible to us. The first is that the narrative unit under study is indeed an autonomous and complete story, materialised in a sequence in *mise-en-abyme*.

Secondly, there is the conjecture that the stillness of a photograph reverses the meaning of the story through the movement created in the editing. This concerns the last photograph, in which Ellen, Paul's partner, appears unexpectedly. It is the only still image with movement, a cinematic *zoom*, and to which a considerable viewing time is added.

Finally, we perceive that the way in which the photographs appear will favour the unveiling of the themes the sequence addresses, as well as their referential and implicit meanings. As Álvarez states, Auster is drawn "to those directors who, like himself, 'give more importance to stories than to technique, who take their time to allow their characters to develop before their eyes, to exist as complete human beings'" (2013, p. 92). The photographs reinforce the relevant themes when the other person understands how to look at the work of art.

4. Methodology

This research is carried out through a methodological triangulation that combines screenplay narrative, film analysis and the analysis of the photographic image, drawing on Barthes and Company and their approaches to stillness, late photography, movement, memory and imposed duration. Company states that photographs always appear in cinema as evidence of something: "the photograph's 'proof' as memory or history is almost always at stake" in most films (2008, p. 95). And later he affirms: "The photograph points to the world, but it also seems to orient the world towards the camera, promising its comprehension" (p. 143). Company's perspective on photographic stillness will help to find the reason for the frozen instant in the narrative of the photographic fragments under study.

Barthes (1989), in *La cámara lúcida* —whose first French edition dates from 1980—, focuses on the emotional response between the image itself and the receiver, with emphasis on the *punctum*, the sensory and emotional response to the personal experience of an image, in Barthes's words "that chance element in it which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (1989, p. 59). We must point out, however, that this precept does not eliminate the *studium*, that is, the understanding of the photograph through culture and one's own knowledge. "Through the *studium* I take an interest in many photographs, whether because I receive them as political testimony or because I savour them as fine historical scenes" (Barthes, 1989, p. 58).

Therefore, in this general and generalist approach, we should also consider a prior analysis from the point of view of the form and content of the photographic image and, of course, the context in which each image is viewed.

As part of the methodology, analysis sheets for the images are drawn up, serving as original material prior to the exploration of the photographs and to the study of the contribution they make to the narrative. The proposed analysis sheets will examine three aspects of the photographs.

First, the primary signification, or *studium*: a permanent support, the photographic one, with specific characteristics and language which, moreover, and despite its polysemic nature, relies on a framing and a moment with a constant cadence and minimal intervention by the author. It entails a general signification derived from the *studium*, in which we would include formal aspects of photographic language.

Next we will address the study of secondary signification and the possibility of the *punctum* in each image, as part of the narrative offered, and the causes of that *punctum* in the final photograph, which has a marked audiovisual component.

Finally, the context offered by the director leads us to analyse, following the neo-formalist school, the framing, editing and sound.

For the film analysis, we follow Bellour's ideas on segmentation and freeze-frames (*freeze-frame*) with their "absolutely contradictory function of opening up the textuality of the film at the very moment they interrupt its unfolding" (2000, p. 26). Thanks to that interruption, it has been possible to explore precisely the duration, content and framing of the photographs.

To examine the quality of the photographs' time, we study —following Casetti and Di Chio— the real duration, that is, "the effective extension of time" of the photos that appear on screen, and the apparent duration, "the perceptual sensation of that extension" (2007, p. 137). As the authors explain, duration will depend both on the content and on the form of representation of the images, and thus the shot size, its visual richness and its internal movement will change the perception of its persistence in the film.

We also draw on Zunzunegui's ideas concerning the micro-analysis of the audiovisual text, its structure and the mise en abyme that can be found in certain segmentations. As the author proposes, the aim here is to analyse "micro-sequences that can be observed under the analytical microscope and in which one can study the condensation of the lines of force that constitute the film from which they are extracted" (1996, p. 15).

The study is carried out with the help of Adobe Premiere. From a digital copy of the sequence, the photographic fragments were studied *frame by frame*, in order to analyse the image, its editing and rhythm, and thus to become a pensive viewer of the digital age who looks at the image as a

technical and temporal construction (Mulvey and van den Oever, 2024). We grouped the snapshots into four methodological analysis sheets, which helped to deepen the study of screenplay narrative and of film and photographic analysis.

5. Results

5.1. The photo sequence

After studying the narrative units that make up the story and the photographs that compose the narrative, it is found that this knot of action, where the photographer shows his photo albums to the writer, is a sequence lasting seven minutes and five seconds and made up of four scenes.

EXT. LATE AFTERNOON. FAÇADE OF THE BROOKLYN CIGAR COMPANY. In the street, Paul asks Auggie —who is closing the tobacco shop— to sell him a couple of packs of Schimmelpennincks. Duration: 31 seconds.

INT. LATE AFTERNOON. THE BROOKLYN CIGAR COMPANY. Paul discovers a camera. Auggie clarifies that it is his, that besides being a tobacconist he is also a photographer. Duration: 1 minute and 3 seconds.

INT. NIGHT. AUGGIE'S APARTMENT. Paul hurriedly looks through the albums and Auggie explains that he will never understand his project if he does not go more slowly as he looks at the photographs. The writer ends up discovering the photo of Ellen, which produces a profound emotion in him. Duration: 5 minutes and 5 seconds.

EXT. DAY. STREET IN FRONT OF THE BROOKLYN CIGAR COMPANY. Auggie taking a photo (Figure 1); we watch how the artist goes about his work of art. Duration: 26 seconds.

Figure 1. Auggie (Harvey Keitel) takes a photo of the corner where his tobacco shop stands.



Source: Still from the film *Smoke*, Wang [Director] (1995). DVD capture © Miramax.

In the screenplay published by Anagrama, this last scene in which Auggie takes the photograph does not appear, although it was indeed filmed and incorporated into the film's final cut. The sequence is made up of four scenes and tells a complete and independent story, to which the three-act structure —usually reserved for plotting and analysing a complete film— can be applied. This structure would consist, according to Seger (1994), of seven events (beginning, inciting incident, first turning point, midpoint, second turning point, climax and ending) that we can identify in most sequences, precisely because of their status as autonomous entities, as happens with any film.

The sequence has an opening that is effective essentially because it begins with a change, apparently irrelevant, but which will be the origin of the story. The writer comes to the tobacco shop just as Auggie is closing, and the two enter the shop together, sharing an unusual moment that will make the beginning of the tale possible.

After this beginning —a curious episode brought about by chance, in which Auggie opens the shop at an untimely hour— the inciting incident takes place, that event "which sets the plot in motion" (Seger, 1994, p. 41), which here is the discovery of the camera that gives rise to the whole fiction.

The first turning point is an event that changes the action radically: the two of them look at Auggie's photos at his home. This situation considerably transforms the characters' relationship. They now share beers and cigarettes in a familiar space, connected by a personal hobby. All of this brings about a deeper, more friendly relationship, which Auster is interested in developing.

The midpoint occurs when Auggie tells him that if he does not go more slowly he will never understand it. The unhurried pace raises the level of comprehension and —as the original Auster story highlights— makes the writer discover Auggie's aim of photographing natural time and its seasons, and human time with the ephemeral stories of the passers-by immortalised in the snapshots. The rhythm of this natural and human time is portrayed in the line by Shakespeare that Auggie quotes: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow —he muttered under his breath—, time creeps on in petty, cautious steps" (1623/2006, p. 150).

The second turning point, a more radical change than the first, arrives when Paul shifts his attitude, begins to contemplate the photos attentively, and then discovers a photo of Ellen and says, moved, to Auggie: "look at her, the love of my life."

It is an emotionally aggressive moment, Barthes's *punctum*, which will give rise to the climax: when the writer bursts into tears, weeping that initiates "an affective recovery in which Auggie's growing friendship will play a primary role" (Deleyto, 2000, p. 96). Auggie's art has fulfilled its objective; it has managed to move the writer and, moreover, their friendship grows, as Paul weeps openly and Auggie comforts him by reaching his arm around behind him. Here, as Eusse (2018, p. 41) indicates, the three elements of temporality stand out —"past, present and future"— while, "within that temporality, experiences occur that generate lived experience and acquire meaning by being resignified in the here and now, through the photographs."

5.2. Analysis of the photographs

It is worth noting that the still photograph is the undisputed protagonist of the narrative. All the events that make up the three-act structure are directly connected to the photographs.

In the scene at Auggie's home, a total of 30 photographs are shown to the viewer, appearing at four distinct moments:

In the first photographic segment we see 16 photographs in four different shots, 4 photos in each shot (Figure 2). In reality there are 15 photographs, since one of them appears repeated by mistake: Auggie takes one photo per day, so it is impossible for the same photo to recur on two different days. Moreover, it is a single shot filmed in continuity, but the turning of the pages creates that sensation of four shots with four photographs in each of them.

Figure 2. The first photos appear four at a time.



Source: Still from the film *Smoke*, Wang [Director] (1995). DVD capture © Miramax.

After seeing the first 16 photographs, Paul says in astonishment that they are all the same. Auggie replies:

—Exactly. More than four thousand photographs from the same spot. The corner of 3rd Street and Seventh Avenue at eight o'clock in the morning. Four thousand days in a row,

whatever the weather (*Pause*). That's why I can never take a holiday. I have to be in my place every morning. Every morning in the same place, at the same time.
—I've never seen anything like it.
—It's my project. What you might call my life's work. (Auster, 1995, pp. 55-56)

Later, we see a photographic fragment made up of 8 photographs chained together across eight different shots (Figure 3). It is the only one of the four fragments in which we hear Auggie's voice off-screen explaining his project, so that the sound changes the perception of the photographs.

Figure 3. Block two of images shows eight photographs with transitions.



Source: Still from the film *Smoke*, Wang [Director] (1995). DVD capture © Miramax.

When the writer understands that he needs more calm and deliberation, 5 photographs (Figure 4) are shown to the audience in succession, chained together by dissolves, in five longer shots, averaging approximately five seconds per photo with transitions of 1 second and 10 *frames*. At the beginning of this fragment we hear Paul's hand turning a page of the album; then all that can be heard is the music of Dmitri Shostakovich, Prelude and Fugue No. 1, Op. 87, performed on the piano by Keith Jarrett, as the film's closing credits reveal.

Figure 4. The third block of images shows each photograph for five seconds.



Source: Still from the film *Smoke*, Wang [Director] (1995). DVD capture © Miramax.

Finally, we see 1 photograph of Ellen (Figure 5), the woman the writer loved. It is the only photo with movement, a *zoom* closing in on her face. The movement of the photograph rescues her from the past, transforms her from a still image into a moving image, from death to life, turning Ellen into a ghost who visits us unexpectedly and moves from left to right across the screen. The *punctum* that the snapshot provokes in Paul does not lie in that movement, but in the photo itself, in Ellen. It is the photo that remains on screen the longest, 10 seconds and 6 *frames*; there is a greater extension in time, and we understand that it provokes the *punctum* in the viewer because of the *zoom* movement that accompanies it. As Campany would say, it is a late photograph, one

that does not arrive at the crucial moment of Ellen's life but at a nondescript instant as she heads to work, which we see afterwards, when she is no longer there; it is a trace of Ellen and her existence, which has now passed.

Figures 5. Two frames from the photograph of Ellen, the only one with movement.



Source: Still from the film *Smoke*, Wang [Director] (1995). DVD capture © Miramax.

In total, 30 photographs divided into four blocks, showing progressively fewer snapshots: 16 in the first block, 8 in the second, 5 in the third and only 1 in the fourth. Likewise, these photographic fragments display progressively fewer people. If we do not count the individuals who are almost entirely hidden or who appear in the background, very small in the snapshots and therefore barely perceptible, 34 people appear in the first fragment, 21 in the second, 13 in the third and only Ellen in the fourth.

The length of time for which the photographs are shown, however, increases. In the first photographic fragment, sixteen photographs appear over 16 seconds and 15 *frames*: the first four in 2 seconds, the next two batches of four photos over 12 seconds, and the last four images in barely 3 seconds. In the second fragment, eight snapshots are seen over 24 seconds and 19 *frames*, with an average duration of 3 seconds for the first photo, 2 seconds for the next six and 5 seconds for the last. It should be borne in mind that in this block and the next, the transition from one snapshot to another is carried out in the editing with transitions that add a longer exposure time to each image. In the third block, five still images are shown over 27 seconds and 8 *frames*; the average duration is 5 seconds for the first two photos, 6 for the next two and 3 seconds for the last. Finally, in the fourth block, we see a single photo for 10 seconds and 6 *frames*.

As can be seen, the duration grows so that the immersion of the characters —and of the audience— is greater and, therefore, more opportunity is given for the *punctum* to appear in the final photo of Ellen, thanks also to the *zoom*. All the people who appear in the photos do so in long shots and medium shots, more open or more closed. The most closely framed image is that of Ellen after her reframing. All the photographs are static, except the last. All these data are collected in Table 1.

Table 1. The four photo fragments in data

Block	Shot	Duration	Avg. duration	Photos	Transitions	People	Movement
1	Medium and long shot	16:15	2 photos (1 s) 5 photos (2 s) 3 photos (1 s)	16	Turning the page by hand.	34 people across 4 shots with: 11, 5, 10 and 8 individuals.	No
2	Medium and long shot	24:19	2 photos (2 s) 5 photos (1 s) 1 photo (6 s)	8	1 second and 10 frames.	21 people across 8 photos with 4, 3, 5, 3, 2, 2, 2 and 0 individuals	No
3	Medium and long shot	27:08	1 photo (4 s) 3 photos (5 s)	5	1 second and 10 frames.	13 people across 5 shots with 1, 3, 3, 2 and 4 individuals.	No

			1 photo (2 s)				
4	Medium and medium close-up shot	10:06	1 photo (10 s)	1	No	1 person in a single shot.	Yes, <i>zoom</i>

Source: Own elaboration, 2026.

In three of the four moments, the primary signification, or *studium*, does not add value —with the exception of the last photograph, that of Ellen, the woman the writer loved. An image on which the *punctum* strikes Paul like a bolt of lightning, and the viewer too. In fact, the viewing of the image is accompanied neither by voice-over nor by music. All that is heard is Paul's emotion in the form of sobs. The influence of the context provided by the director, together with the above, resignifies the value of the photographic image: it is an image (one with a *zoom* effect, two if we count the entry and exit) that serves as the conclusion to this inner story told through photographic images.

The photo of Ellen goes from being something dead to something alive, since, as Candela (2014, p. 21) explains, citing Schaeffer: "The photographic image opens up temporal distance, causing time to emerge through it as past, whereas the filmic image closes that abyss and opens time as presence, experienced in the present." It is the moment where the sequence conveys the strongest emotion, which the viewer observes in Paul's distress and which strikes the audience itself, like "a shudder of the idea through a shudder of the body" (Bellour, 2013, p. 153). The writer's distress upon encountering Ellen physically affects Paul, creating the *punctum* in the character. For the viewer, however, the physical distress and the *punctum* arrive through the photograph and the editing: through the appearance of Ellen as a moving ghost —which is not how Paul perceives her, but only the viewer— plus Paul's disturbance as a result of seeing the photograph, which provokes an emotion that we can hear (sobs) and see (Paul, disturbed, covers his face with his hand). Thanks to all these elements of framing, editing and sound, the viewer understands the whole tragedy. Moreover, as Barthes explains, any other detail could originate or heighten the *punctum* in the viewer: the umbrella in search of protection —a shelter she did not find when there was a robbery in the neighbourhood and a bullet ended her life by chance as she was heading to work— could also lie in her docile, pensive gaze.

In the four moments analysed, and therefore in the images as a whole, the context offered by the director (Table 1 and analysis sheet) is fundamental to the resignification of the images. In the last moment, primary signification, secondary signification and context harmoniously feed back into one another to heighten the emotional impact of the resignification.

The photograph on its own produces emotion in the character of Paul, but not in the viewer, who needs the intermediality of framing in order to be affected. That *making* of the photograph is manifested in the pose, the movement, the context, the juxtaposition and the sound.

The four photographic fragments established through sets of images, which are perceived as narrative moments, approach a classical narrative scheme: moments 1 and 2 (preamble-introduction), moment 3 (development) and moment 4 (dénouement), acting as a pre-schematic stage of the three-act structure analysed.

Time, both in the process of taking the photos and in the editing, is established as something fundamental, especially the duration of the viewing —carrying a more than specific weight in the understanding and the approach to the images.

5.3. The theme of the photo sequence

The theme of the sequence is, first of all, related to the world of art, of the everyday artist. When the writer rushes as he looks at the photos, the photographer assures him that he will not understand them if he does not go more slowly; "but they're all the same," the writer replies. To which the photographer retorts (Auster, 1995, pp. 56-57):

They're all the same, but each one is different from all the others. You've got your bright mornings and your dark mornings. You've got your summer light and your autumn light. You've got your weekdays and your weekends. You've got people in overcoats and galoshes, and people in shorts and T-shirts. Sometimes they're the same people, sometimes they're different ones. And sometimes the different ones become the same, and the same ones disappear. The earth revolves around the sun, and every day the sunlight strikes the earth at a different angle.

We will witness all this visual and human richness that Auggie describes while the viewer looks at the eight photos chained together across eight different shots, where, as Table 1 records, the framing is tighter, the images take on greater importance and the people are easy to identify. Thus we will discover a group of colleagues, people on their own, the same couple in two photographs at different moments; we will see umbrellas and sun caps, warm clothing and short-sleeved T-shirts.

Solitude is another theme that permeates the sequence. Two solitary people meet at night and decide to share a few beers and the art of one of them: his love of photography. Many of the people who appear in the photos are alone. A solitary man discovers the love of his life —now gone— in one of the photos and is deeply moved by his loss. The solitary artist confronts his work in the final scene of the sequence.

New York is another of its emblematic themes; here the story takes us to Brooklyn, the neighbourhood where Paul Auster lived. Although there is not much room in the sequence to show the city, with the exception of the corner where Auggie's tobacco shop stands, we do hear its sonic rhythm: the shouts of passers-by protesting, the urban soundscape, pedestrian traffic, the siren of a police car that we glimpse partially. At the end of the sequence, the street is shown full of life and people, when Auggie takes his photo.

Chance, another of Auster's favourite themes, is also a protagonist of the story: by chance, Paul arrives at the tobacco shop just as Auggie is closing it. By chance, Paul discovers the camera in the shop. Paul begins to contemplate the photos attentively and, by chance, comes across the snapshot of Ellen. By chance, Auggie captures the passers-by who are the protagonists of his photos when he presses the shutter.

Death as a theme appears closely linked to the way the sequence builds the narrative through the photos. "There is nothing like the 'presence' of the moving image to emphasise the 'pastness' of the photograph. [...], since, as a technology, the still image is a part or a ghost of the moving image; its memory or its primitive ancestor" (Campany, 2003).

6. Discussion

The photos constitute the essence of the sequence under study. Without them it would be impossible to tell the story. Referring to that transcendence of the snapshot in Auster, Álvarez comments on the screenplay of *Smoke*: "the text highlights the basic component of every *film*: the still photo, or frame, which through editing becomes moving images" (2010, p. 91). Here the still photos will serve to compose the film, express the themes addressed and build the narrative.

The photo sequence is the most emblematic of the film. The effectiveness of the story is directly related to its structure, since it is thanks to that richness of narrative resources and skilfully interwoven turns of events that the story achieves its objective of moving the viewer.

Auster's favourite themes are reflected in the sequence: the encounter of two solitary people, reflections on artistic creation, the passing of time, chance and its unexpected surprises that transform us inwardly, contemplation, the reality of the everyday shaped from fragments of instants of strangers' lives. All of this constitutes a *mise-en-abyme* of the film. The photographer who builds his narrative through snapshots points us back to the story of a writer in crisis looking for a Christmas story to publish, or of a teenager searching for the narrative of his own identity.

As has been shown, the photographs give the sequence's story a documentary character that brings the narrative closer to reality, ritual and memory through the archive. When the writer asks Auggie how he came up with such an unusual project, he replies with conviction: "I don't know, it just came to me. After all, it's my corner. Just a small part of the world, but things happen

there too, just like anywhere else. It's a document of my little place" (Auster, 1995, p. 56). Auggie refers to his project as a document, aptly underscoring the documentary character of his art, of memory and archive. In this sense he produces a social and human cartography of the urban space chosen for his project and of the trace of time upon it. This is nothing like the post-photography studied by Fontcuberta, which "reverses photographic realism; it is no longer the image that must conform to the world, but the world that must conform to the image" (2016, p. 47). Here the still image conforms to reality, which it archives through a meticulous method that gathers the memory of the small corner of Brooklyn where Auggie lives.

The conception of time is configured as an important element of resignification. In Auster's words in the original story: "I realised I was photographing time." It follows this line of natural time, present in an inexorable way in the very mechanics of the photographic act, and a human time that appears in the viewing and new signification, making possible everything from an emotional and metaphorical understanding to the reviving of the dead.

The sequence develops the story of an everyday, anonymous artist that moves whoever approaches it with an open mind, calm and attention —through a process of approach from the perspective of Company and his late photograph, and Barthes as regards the capacities of the photographic image itself and the appearance of unexpected elements that implicate the viewer. Photography thus aids fiction, moving away from its exclusively documentary bias and far "from being a simple faithful representation of the world; it is a medium that allows photographers to construct visual narratives that oscillate between the real and the imagined" (Guerrero and González, 2025, p. 46).

7. Conclusions

The narrative unit of the photos in the film *Smoke*, the object of study, is constituted as a sequence that follows the three-act structure, which makes it possible to give greater depth to the narrative thanks to the richness of the storytelling. That same sequence is also constituted as a *mise en abyme* of the forms and themes of the film.

All the events that make up the narrative are directly connected to the photographs. The still images prove valuable for telling the story and for developing the themes referred to: solitude, chance, the meaning of art, the passing of time, life shaped from fragments of reality, and the encounter with the other, configuring an urban cartography of the human trace through time on a small corner of Brooklyn.

It has been found to be decisive —thanks to the methodological triangulation— that the *punctum* does not eliminate the *studium* and that, in the signification of a photographic image, the context created by the profilmic and the editing is fundamental.

The character's emotional response to the image of Ellen is achieved through the unhurried pace of looking at the photos and through chance, which enable Paul's encounter with the photograph and, therefore, the writer's personal emotion before the image.

For the viewer, the *punctum* strikes through the resignification of the photograph by means of framing and editing. The profilmic imprints a rhythm that progressively slows down in order to discover the photographs in greater depth, until reaching that of Ellen, which is the one with the longest duration. The emotion in the viewer is also heightened thanks to the juxtaposition of the last photograph, with its *zoom* movement, and the image of Paul moved by his discovery, the off-screen sound of the sobs and the presence of silence in most of these two shots. Photography, then, in order to produce the *punctum* in the viewer, requires the intermediality of framing, movement, editing and sound design, which to a large extent appear designed, explicitly and implicitly, in the narrative of the film screenplay.

8. Acknowledgements

This article forms part of the work carried out by the university research group (details omitted for peer review).

References

- Álvarez, E. (2010). El ilusionista de las palabras: Paul Auster y su universo creativo. *Arbor*, 186(741), 89–97. <https://doi.org/10.3989/arbor.2010.741n1009>
- Auster, P. (1995) *Smoke & Blue in the face*. Anagrama.
- Barthes, R. (1989) *La cámara lúcida. Nota sobre la fotografía*. Ediciones Paidós Ibérica.
- Bellour, R. (2000). *The Analysis of film*. Indiana University Press.
- Bellour, R. (2013). *El cuerpo del cine: Hipnosis, emociones, animalidades*. Shangrila.
- Campany, D. (2003). Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on the problems of 'Late Photography'. En D. Green (Ed.), *Where is the Photograph?* Photoworks/Pram. <https://davidcampany.com/safety-in-numbness/>
- Campany, D. (2008). *Photography and cinema*. Reaktion Books.
- Candela, C. (2014). El tiempo en la dialéctica entre imagen fija e imagen móvil. *EU-topías. Revista de Interculturalidad, Comunicación y Estudios Europeos*, 7, 19–29. <https://turia.uv.es/index.php/eutopias/article/view/18832>
- Casetti, F. y Di Chio, F. (2007). *Cómo analizar un film*. Paidós.
- Cercas, J. (2003). Paul Auster, el vértigo de narrar. (28/5/2003) *Aceprenta*. <https://www.aceprenta.com/cultura/libros/paul-auster-el-v-rtigo-de-narrar/>
- De la Prida, R. (2021). Mise-en-Abyme as Narrative Strategy in the Films of Wes Anderson, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 39(8), 1767–1786. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2021.1967682>
- Deleyto, C. (2000). *Wayne Wang. Smoke*. Ediciones Paidós.
- Eusse Florez, J. P. (2018). Relación entre la temporalidad, las vivencias y las emociones generadas a partir de las fotografías y la interpretación terapéutica con estas, desde la película *Smoke* del director Wayne Wang. *Poiésis*, (34), 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.21501/16920945.2786>
- Field, S. (1995). *The Screenwriter's Workbook*. Dell Publishing Company.
- Autor. (2019). [Título omitido para revisión por pares].
- Fontcuberta, J. (2016). *La furia de las imágenes: Notas sobre la postfotografía*. Galaxia Gutenberg.
- Guerrero-Valerio, B. y González-Díez, L. (2025). La fotografía documental, entre la evidencia y la creación: Cristina García Roderó y Cristina de Middel. *Fotocinema. Revista Científica De Cine Y Fotografía*, (30), 43–67. <https://doi.org/10.24310/fotocinema.30.2025.20580>
- McKee, R. (2003). *Story*. Harper-Collins Publishers.
- Sánchez-Escalonilla, A. (2014) *Estrategias de guion cinematográfico. El proceso de creación de una historia*. Ariel.
- Seeger, L. (1994). *Como convertir un buen guion en un guion excelente*. Ediciones Rialp.
- Shakespeare, W. (2006/1963). *Macbeth* (E. M. García, Trad.). Planeta.
- Wang, W. (Director). (1995). *Smoke*. [película]. Miramax.
- Zunzunegui, S. (1996). *La mirada cercana. Microanálisis fílmico*. Paidós.
- Zúñiga Contreras, R. (2023). Roland Barthes o el ardor fotográfico: Fotografía y locura en *La chambre claire* (1980). *HYBRIS. Revista de Filosofía*, 14(1), 119–146. <https://revistas.cenalties.cl/index.php/hybris/article/view/545>