



Fotonovela

By: Michael J. Emme
and Anna Kirova

You may have noticed that animated cartoons have moved from being cutting-edge to commonplace as a form of adult television programming. Similarly, fiction told primarily through pictures is moving from underground 'zine culture and corner-store, childrens' pulp entertainment into the mainstream. The graphic novel section of your local franchise bookstore is likely to be in as prominent a location as the barrista and espresso machine. A closer look will reveal image-based feature stories aimed at audiences interested in biography, history, politics, relationships, adventure, and (of course) fantasy. The readers' of graphic novels range enormously in interest and age, but what they share in common is an appreciation for the role that artwork and the comic-book style sequential framing can play in enriching narrative.

Some years ago comic book artist Will Eisner suggested that comic books are 'sequential art' (1985). Later, in 'Understanding Comics' (1993) Scott McCloud produced what still serves as 'the' elements and principles of comic book design. This 200-page text, presented entirely in comic book form itself, both shows and tells about the artistry in the images within a comic frame, and the many potential narrative strategies available in the space between the frames. Both of these artist-authors represent the first wave of the first generations that have been brought up in an environment where childhood stories are both plentifully published and visual.

A popular literary form that shares much in common with comic books and graphic novels, but actually has a demographic history that flows in the opposite direction is the fotonovela. First popularized in the '40's and 50's in Italy as 'fotoromanzo',

Fotonovela feature tableau photographs of actors instead of drawings. In terms of framing and the use of text balloons, all of the other design elements are similar to comic books. Known now as 'Photo-roman' in Québec and France, and also as 'Fumetti' in Italy (because the text balloons look like clouds), Fotonovela (the Spanish term) started out as adult oriented romance melodramas based on the film stills in popular movies. By combining the sense of realism that is the hallmark of photography's appeal, with text that was necessarily simplified to fit in text balloons, fotonovela were appealing and accessible to audiences who, because of limited time, interest, access or ability, may never have been able to read a full, text-only novel.

Fotonovela were eventually created to appeal to a wider range of audiences. In Mexico, fotonovela rosa (pink) describe the romance stories; fotonovela roja (red) are more graphic ('adult'?) in terms of images and situations; fotonovela suave (smooth) are 'more sophisticated in layout and story line, proclaiming in [their] ads that you'd be proud to have [them] in your home (La revista que si puede antrar en su hogar) (Levy Reed, 1998. P.4). The heyday of the fotonovela was between the '50s and the '70's. More recently the form has been used by health agencies such as UNICEF and the Canadian Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (http://www.camh.net/health_promotion/photovellas.html) as a way of communicating information about everything from nutrition, AIDS, and depression to childcare.

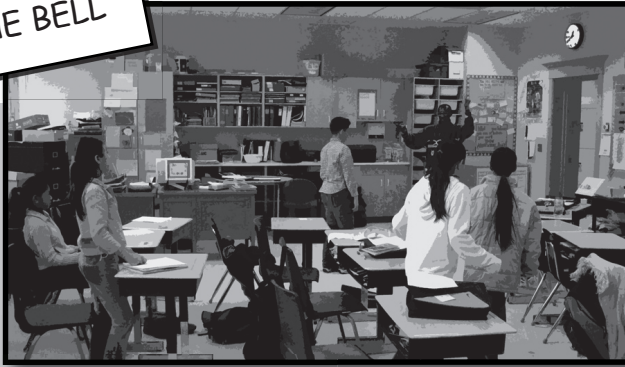
Getting In To Basketball



Written, performed and designed by: C,M,S,&V.

As an art educator and researcher, I became aware of the fotonovela 15 years ago because of activist artist, teacher and photographer Kay Torres. At a conference of The Society for Photographic Education (<http://www.spenational.org>) I heard Kay describe working as an artist with a women's crisis centre in Los Angeles where she helped workers and clients in that context produce fotonovela pamphlets designed to educate women to recognize situations where they deserved and needed help or protection. With that knowledge and experience, Kay told of entering a school environment as an artist-in-residence where communication was a challenge because students' first languages were evenly divided between Spanish, Vietnamese, and English. She joined with a photography class to produce a fotonovela student handbook that was published tri-lingually. The book had the double benefit of ensuring that all kids had access to the basic rules and resources of the school, while simultaneously introducing all of the students to the languages of their peers.

THE BELL



STOP AT THE WASHROOM ON THE



(IF YOU NEED TO.)

OUR TEACHER SENDS US TO LUNCH SO WE ALL GO DOWNSTAIRS



YOU CAN SMELL THE FOOD BEFORE YOU SEE IT.



It's
Lunch
time!

At Our School

LINE UP

TAKE A TRAY

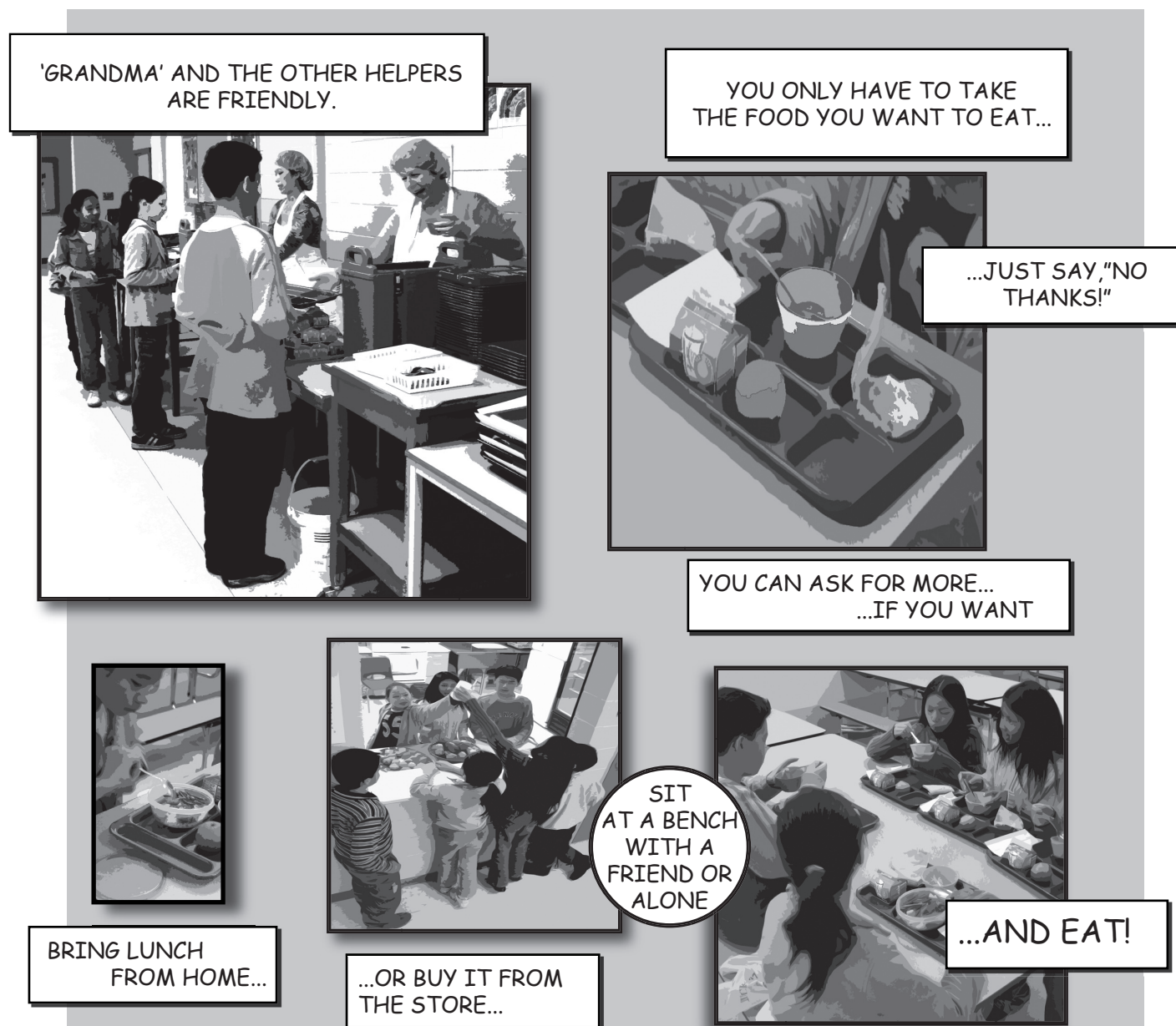
Kay's presentation came back to me recently while working with my research partner, Anna Kirova. Anna wanted to research with immigrant children around their experience of non-verbal communication as new students in Canadian schools. A series of conversations (and one failed grant attempt) eventually lead me back to Kay's work. The visual works included with this paper are examples of fotonovela produced as part of that research. In each case grade 4,5 and 6 students joined in a process of documentary photography, interview and storytelling that lead to the development of these stories. In each case the kids' efforts were supported by teachers with strong backgrounds in the elementary classroom, and in drama. We were also supported by graduate students who shared the cultures and many of the immigrant experiences of the children. The growing accessibility of digital photo-technology have allowed picture-making to be playful and casual. These new tools have also allowed the formatting of the fotonovela and the filtering of images for the sake of privacy to move from being technical barriers to aesthetic opportunities (Emme & Kirova, In Press).

REFERENCES

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RESOURCES

The Society for Photographic Education (<http://www.spenational.org>)



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