How Pictures Tell Stories

How Pictures Tell Stories:

Essays on Pictorial Narrativity

By

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PREFACE

Storytelling permeates human life in almost every aspect. Our collective as well as individual memories and identities are bound up in narratives; our sources of happiness, hopes, and fears have become the subject of innumerable stories and myths. Taxonomically speaking, we may be classified as homo sapiens sapiens. In more metaphorical ways, though, many attempts have been made to circumscribe what makes us uniquely human. Thus, we have been named homo ludens (playing man), homo faber (tool-making man), homo ridens (laughing man), or homo loquens (talking man). All these binomial names certainly point to characteristics which seem to make us special and distinguish us from animals. To these names, we might also add *homo narrans*-storytelling man. We tell stories, all the time. Storytelling is a decisive human, cognitive instrument for organizing and stabilizing our experiences, for creating continuity and intelligibility within our often unpredictable and fluctuating existence.

Moreover, narrative is an efficient means for information transmission and displaying possible realities, without the risks and efforts involved in first-hand experience. Narratives may function as informational storage devices which are remarkably memorable and easy to spread within a community. As pointed out by e.g. Dan Sperber, a story such as "Little Red Riding Hood" is far more complex than a 20-digit number; still, the latter demands considerably more effort to remember (Sperber 1985). Stories stick, not least in pictorial form. Last, but certainly not least, stories are frequently used as means for consolidating, altering, or manipulating people's beliefs, values, attitudes, or behaviour. Narratives may, for religious, political, or otherwise ideological reasons, function as instruments of power (see esp. chapter 3).

Studies on narrative have, for natural reasons, to a considerable extent focused on verbal storytelling, whether oral or literary. Still, as I believe, scholars of story need to do more to highlight the relevance of pictorial narratives. Storytelling has, throughout history, by no means been restricted to language-based media. Well-developed forms of pictorial stories can already be found in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, from the 3rd millennium BCE onwards. However, antecedents emerged as early as about 5000 BCE in e.g. Fennoscandia (i.e., rock carvings which depict interacting human agents and animals; cf. Ranta et al. 2019; 2020; Skoglund

et al. 2021) and Eastern Spain (i.e. so-called Levantine rock art). Pictorial storytelling is thus an age-old human activity.

This collection of essays attempts to bridge the gap between a language-oriented narratology and art history. It examines some basic and regularly occurring narrative aspects of pictures from a cognitive and semiotic point of view, where possible criteria and manifestations of pictorial narrativity will be presented and discussed. Further, the narrativeness of pictures, their "tellability" qua stories, will be considered-that is, what makes them worth telling at all, or their noteworthiness. What narrative features might be more relevant than others as 'good-making' qualities of pictorial storytelling? Moreover, to what extent does pictorial narrating presuppose the beholder's previous acquaintance with verbally communicated stories? Which role play categorization processes of beholders regarding conceivable action sequences? And how do pictorial representations imply or presuppose wider worldviews or meta-narratives? In order to clarify these and related issues, my studies have drawn on interdisciplinary research, especially from art history, philosophy, semiotics, narratology, cognitive psychology, and anthropology, which I have attempted to apply to concrete art historical material.

The ideas put forward in this selection of essays on pictorial narrativity have been several years in development and been presented at various conferences, symposiums, and seminars, mostly within the fields of aesthetics and semiotics.

Especially the seminars at the Division of Cognitive Semiotics at Lund University, where I have been engaged as a research fellow 2010-2020, have been intellectually highly stimulating and encouraging. I would like to thank all participants for their valuable comments, suggestions, and also critical remarks, which certainly have contributed to clarifying and improving my thoughts. Most notably, I am indebted to prof. Göran Sonesson for his constructive reflections, not only regarding my work, but also visual semiotics in general.

The essays here consist of a number of papers, which have been previously published and/or submitted at various congresses. However, for the present volume they have been somewhat altered and merged in order to increase their coherence and to avoid overlaps.

- *Chapter 1. Storytelling in the Pictorial Arts* was published in the online journal Contemporary Aesthetics (vol. 9, 2011) under the title "Stories in Pictures (and Non-Pictorial Objects) – A Narratological and Cognitive Psychological Approach".

- *Chapter 2. Worldviews in Pictorial Storytelling* was published in Contemporary Aesthetics (vol. 5, 2007) under the title "Implied World Views in Pictures: Reflections from a Cognitive Psychological and Anthropological Point of View" and in Storyworlds (vol. 5, University of Nebraska Press, 2013, 1-30) under the title "(Re-)Creating Order: Narrativity and Implied World Views in Pictures".

- *Chapter 3. Anti-Semitic Narratives: The Pictorial Construction of Otherness* (or parts thereof) was published in the online journal Kunsttexte.de (vol. 3, 2010) under the title "Narrativity and Historicism in National Socialist Art"; in Language and Semiotic Studies (vol. 2, 2016) under the title "The (Pictorial) Construction of Collective Identities in the Third Reich"; and in Contemporary Aesthetics (vol. 15, 2017) under the title "Master Narratives and the (Pictorial) Construction of Otherness: Anti-Semitic Images in the Third Reich and Beyond". A Chinese translation of parts of the latter has been published in the journal "Cultural Studies/文化研" (no. 37). Moreover, some central parts of this chapter have been elaborated within the research project at Lund University, "The Making of Them and Us (MaTUs) - Cultural Encounters Conveyed through Pictorial Narrative" (2014-2016), funded by The Marcus and Amalia Wallenberg Foundation, to which I hereby would like to express my gratitude.

- *Chapter 4. Relevance and Tellability in Pictures* was published in the anthology "Relevance and Narrative Research" (eds. Matei Chihaia and Katharina Rennhak; Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 81-105, 2019; all rights reserved) under the title "Communication, Life, and Dangerous Things: On Relevance and Tellability in Pictures".

- *Chapter 5. Art, Narratives, and Morality* was presented at the XVIIth International Congress of Aesthetics (Ankara, Turkey, July 2007) under the title "Art, Narratives, and Morality-Is Kokoschka's The Prometheus Triptych a 'Good' Work of Art?".

I would like to thank the publishers for their kind permission to republish the articles in modified form for the present volume.

I am especially indebted to the Institute of Semiotics and Media Studies (ISMS) at the College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University (SCU), Chengdu, for its generous support and encouragement, where I have had the privilege to serve as a visiting professor. The publication of the present volume has also been made possible by the financial support of SCU, for which I am very grateful. I would also like to

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Numerous faculty members of the ISMS have been extremely helpful and supportive, giving me their unreserved appraisal. I would especially like to thank prof. Henry (Yiheng) Zhao (赵毅衡), prof. Yirong Hu (胡易容), prof. Gary (Guangxiang) Rao (饶广祥), prof. Zhenglan Lu (陆正兰), and (former faculty member) prof. Jia Peng (彭佳).

Moreover, and not least, innumerable students have, with their enthusiasm, curiosity, and friendliness, contributed to make my stay utterly pleasant.

Many thanks, all of you!

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Stockholm/Chengdu, January 2022

Michael Ranta

CHAPTER 1

STORYTELLING IN THE PICTORIAL ARTS

1.1 Narrativity in Pictures

From a commonsensical point of view, pictures are basically considered to be depictions of objects, persons, landscapes, or states of affairs. Accordingly, accounts of pictorial representation have frequently been concerned with the general nature of depiction. Moreover, related concepts such as "portrayal", "symbol", "expression", "fiction", and "imagination" have been much debated, and especially one issue has puzzled numerous scholars, namely how flat pictures can represent space, perspective, or three-dimensional objects. Still, the question as to how static pictures can represent actions, temporal structures, and narratives has been treated without comparable penetration.

Narration has frequently been associated with verbal discourse, whether in written or oral form, where events or situations are represented in a time sequence. Accordingly, theoretical discussions concerning narrativity have usually focused on literature and drama. Granted, although static pictorial narratives, such as paintings, have fallen outside the predominant narratological focus on verbal storytelling, narrative theorists have engaged with other visual modes, including the moving-picture media of film and television.[1] Further, art historians have studied the narrative aspects of visual art, though chiefly from a descriptive, interpretative, and historical point of view.[2] Yet attempts to elucidate the theoretical and cognitive basis of visual narrativity, especially in static pictures, have been relatively rare.[3]

At first glance, narratives would indeed seem to be best supported by "genuine" temporal arts, such as poetry, drama, literature in general, motion pictures, or the like, which have an inherently sequential structure. Static pictures, by contrast, are only capable of representing timeless situations or single, momentary instants. However, the ability of static pictures to represent actions and to narrate stories has received much less attention in art theory contexts. Attempts to elucidate any deeper psychological and philosophical aspects involved in visual narrativity have

usually occurred on a superficial level, consisting of scattered remarks, intuitively based hypotheses, or the like. Any continuous and systematic treatment of narrative and temporal imagery seems to be largely absent.[4]

This relative lack of theoretical interest is somewhat surprising, since visual narratives undoubtedly occur in most historical and cultural contexts. With regard to Western art, we find examples of pictorial storytelling at least as early as in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, as well as in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and numerous examples from the Middle East or Asia could certainly be cited.[5]

Unfortunately, deeper theoretical reflections on this matter are often rather scarce even among art historians. Erwin Panofsky, one of the most influential art historians with outspoken theoretical concerns, may be credited with having elaborated the iconographical or iconological methods. According to Panofsky, a fruitful investigation of works of art should strive for an analysis of their meaning, in contradistinction to their formal aspects. These aspects occur on several levels.[6] First, we have a *pre-iconographic level*, such as the depiction of human beings, animals, and natural or artificial objects. The identification of gestures, expressive qualities, and simple actions also belongs to this level. A second interpretative level is *iconographical analysis*, which consists in identifying the subject matter or theme of the artwork. An iconographical interpretation demands an identification of the depicted agents as certain persons (for example, the Virgin Mary or Heracles) or personifications with certain attributes, and would, if necessary, contain some reference to relevant myths or tales, that is, complex action sequences.[7] However, there is little analysis of the exact nature of such narratives, that is, the various means used by the artist in order to convey them, and the presuppositions needed on part of the beholder in order to understand them, in contrast to the rendering of space and perspective. It should be pointed out that Panofsky is no exception in that respect. Indeed, among art historians, as well as aestheticians, problems of narrativity in pictorial art have hardly received any continuous and thorough attention compared to those other issues.

To some extent this neglect is understandable. Usual conceptions of pictorial representation seem irreconcilable with the commonsense idea of narration as being temporal and sequential, or, put in another way, as a "temporal program" explicitly manifested by a work. Paintings seem to present themselves as holistic and almost immediately graspable, while verbal narratives are viewed as linear, requiring a temporally successive perceptual process. As the narratologist Gerald Prince has proposed, a minimal requirement for something to be a narrative consists of "the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time

sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other."[8] We may note, however, that among narratologists no agreement exists regarding the exact definition of narrative. Frequently. the representation of a sequence or series of events has indeed been considered to be essential.[9] However, perhaps even the representation of only a single event, as suggested by Gérard Genette, might be a sufficient criterion for a narrative: a "narrative [can] without difficulty [be defined] as the representation of an event or sequence of events".[10] And he further claims that "as soon as there is an action or an event, even a single one, there is a story because there is a transformation, a transition from an earlier to a later and resultant state".[11] This means that not only the sentence "The king died and then the queen died" would constitute a narrative, but also simply the sentence "The king died". Indeed, as frequently seems to be the case, minimal narratives, as envisaged by Genette, may sometimes consist of representations of just single events by implying a past and a present. A painting showing the *Annunciation of the Virgin Mary* would be a clear-cut example of a narrative in accordance with such a view. And as Prince himself has admitted, such a minimal definition may capture the difference between narratives and non-narratives, such as book titles, logical syllogisms, or generalizing statements such as "Men are bipedal animals." Still, we should also consider various degrees of narrativity; some texts are more narrative than others; they are more like complex *plots* rather than simple *stories*.[12]

Be this as it may, not all modes of discourse may be reasonably regarded as narratives. For instance, *arguments* are usually considered to be deductive or inductive forms of persuasion, relying on logic, although not necessarily strict syllogisms, intended to prove the validity of an idea or point of view. *Expositions* can be described as acts of expounding, setting forth, explaining, or conveying information, such as about a narrative's plot, characters, setting, and theme. *Descriptions*, verbally or visually, present the properties of things, persons, places, events, or actions, as well as nonvisible or abstract states of affairs. And *explanations*, such as deductive-nomological or teleological ones, can be briefly defined as descriptive statements attempting to clarify the causes, contextual circumstances, and consequences of certain facts. None of these discursive modes has an internal time sequence seemingly required by narrative structures; they seem to be static or atemporal. Still, narratives may very well make use of, incorporate, or overlap with arguments, expositions, descriptions, or explanations.

Although Prince points out that there are many different manifestations and varying degrees of narrativity [13], he seems to adhere to a rather essentialist definition of the concept, where the necessary, and

perhaps even sufficient, characteristic consists of the "event-sequence" criterion. Thus, according to Prince, a sentence such as "The water boiled then World War II started" would qualify as a minimal narrative.[14] However, to call such an extremely reduced event sequence a narrative seems to be rather counterintuitive, as also Prince admits.[15] As Noël Carroll has argued, such an example should instead be counted as a mere chronicle, where the crucial "narrative connection" is missing. Such a connection does not necessarily consist of strict causal entailments; rather, "[in] most narratives, the earlier events in a sequence of events underdetermine later events."[16] Influenced by J. L. Mackie's discussion of so-called INUS conditions, Carroll argues that a narrative connection occurs when there is "an insufficient but necessary part of a condition that itself is unnecessary but sufficient for an effect event."[17]

An example of such INUS conditions would be the following sentence: "The thief enters the bank to rob it, but subsequently, as he exits, he is apprehended by the police." Although the robbing of the bank is causally relevant, it does not causally determine the arrest. Apart from INUS conditions, according to Carroll, a narrative connection (1) also requires a perspicuously ordered temporal relation between the occurring events; (2) concerns the career of at least one unified subject (rather than just adding up disparate or disconnected subjects); and (3) is structured in a globally forward-looking manner, rather than being orientated "backwards."[18] Other narratologists, such as Monika Fludernik, have attempted to delineate narratives from other forms of discourse by also stressing the involvement of human protagonists, or at least anthropomorphic ones, such as speaking animals, performing goal-directed actions and being anchored in particular (existential) time-space settings (see also section 2.2).[19]

Even so, most accounts of narrativity, including Genette's, have been concerned with – and sometimes even been restricted to – verbal forms of storytelling, while other narrative types, such as pictorial ones, have been treated quite casually. At first glance, such representations are most favorably manifested by "genuine" temporal arts, such as poetry, drama, literature in general, and motion pictures, which inherently have a sequential structure. Pictures, on the other hand, are often presupposed to be inherently static and only capable of representing timeless situations or single, momentary instants. (Thus, the concept "static picture" would appear to be tautological.)

Accounts such as these have been put forward by Lord Shaftesbury, James Harris, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.[20] In *Discourse on Music, Painting and* Poetry (1744), Harris distinguished between media such as music, which is concerned with motion and sound, and painting, which

renders shapes and colors. Pictures, according to Harris, can "of necessity [only represent] a punctum temporis or instant." Interestingly, though, he also admits that "in a Story well known the Spectator's Memory will supply the previous and the subsequent… [This] cannot be done where such knowledge is wanting." Indeed, he doubts whether the rendering of a historical situation in a painting would even be intelligible, "supposing history to have been silent and to have given no additional information."[21]

A more well-known and much-debated account was put forward by Lessing in *Laokoon: oder über die Grenzen der Malerei* (1766), where he attempted to characterize the distinctive features of painting vs. poetry *qua* signs, claiming that the representation, or "imitation", of actions does primarily (and best) occur in poetry: "Objects which exist side by side...are called bodies. Consequently bodies with their visible properties are the peculiar subjects of painting. Objects which succeed each other... are actions. Consequently actions are the peculiar subjects of poetry."[22]

Lessing claimed that painting essentially is an art of space concerned with the rendering of bodies, while poetry is an art of time, the latter being privileged in narrating actions, that is, the succession of events in time. But poetry cannot render actions without being "joined to certain agents. In so far as those agents are bodies or regarded as such, poetry describes also bodies, but only indirectly through actions." [23] And "bodies…exist not only in space, but also in time… [P]ainting can imitate actions also, but only as they are suggested through forms." That is, painting is capable of indicating actions, though only indirectly through suggestion, namely by preferably choosing the most pregnant, arrested movement in an imagined action sequence: "Painting, in its coexistent imitations, can use but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow."[24]

The representation/perception of actions in painting is thus not impossible *per se*, but it demands more effort, and is less "convenient" compared to poetry. Actually, the difference between painting and poetry is more a matter of degree than a matter of kind: poetry represents actions directly, painting only indirectly.

A number of objections might be raised here, however. Pictorial media seem indeed to lack narrative precision compared to verbal ones, for example when it comes to capturing the characters' internal states and motivations. Static pictures also seem only to suggest changes which the viewer has to infer, rather than explicitly representing the actual changes. It could further be argued that pictorial media only to a very limited extent can figure disnarrated elements, such as detailed alternative courses of action or

characters' unfulfilled intentions.[25] In general, it seems, pictorial media, when compared to verbal language, require recipients who are more active in the reconstruction of narratives.

But again, the contrast is not as distinct as it might first appear. Thus, literary works too involve ellipses, unstated facts or assumptions, implied causal relations, gaps, points of indeterminacy, and so on; all of these structures likewise require interpreters to fill in or complete the patterns at issue. Actually, all texts include gaps and demand active efforts of meaning or coherence making (see also section 2.3).[26] Hence previous theorists may have exaggerated the contrast between the narrative-supporting or -enabling power of verbal language versus that of static pictures.[27] Moreover, Lessing may very well be criticized for committing a naturalistic fallacy. From a *factual* description of the two genres as primarily spatial or temporal in their essential nature, he also comes to the *normative* conclusion that these genres ought to be restricted to those natural, functional characteristics.[28] But is there any reason why we should adhere to such a rigorous normative position, just by referring to various degrees of convenience or ease?

Still, it seems quite possible that narratology's primary concern with temporally extended arts, such as literature, movies, and so on, could have been influenced by similar essentialist lines of thought. We may ask, however, whether and to what extent conceptions of pictorial representation as basically static and non-temporal are tenable. It has frequently been admitted that the perception of pictures in itself is a temporal, successive process. In his essay "Time in the Plastic Arts" (1949), Étienne Souriau argued that the view that a pictorial work is seen "in its entirety in a single instant... is clearly false;" rather, viewing a picture, as with other visual works of art, involves "a period of contemplation wherein successive reactions take place."[29]

This is not only the case when it comes to three-dimensional objects, such as inspecting a sculpture or walking through a Gothic cathedral; two-dimensional paintings also demand a similar effort. However, according to Souriau, the fictive time inherent in a pictorial representation "radiates... around the prerogative moment represented..., a structural center from which the mind moves backward to the past and forward to the future"; in this respect, then, his view bears a close similarity to Lessing's.[30] Ernst Gombrich provides another example, maintaining that "...[t]he reading of a picture...happens in time, in fact it needs a very long time....We do it, it seems, more or less as we read a page, by scanning it with our eyes....We build it up in time and hold the bits and pieces we scan in readiness till they

fall into place as an imaginable object or event, and it is this totality we perceive and check against the picture in front of us."[31]

Numerous experiments on eye movements and picture perception have confirmed that the perception of pictorial representations involves temporally extended scanning activities and feature analysis. The Russian psychologist Alfred Yarbus, one of the pioneers in this field of research, studied the saccadic movements of beholders' eyes when encountering different kinds of visual stimuli, such as photographs or paintings.[32] Eye movements do not occur arbitrarily, but are systematic scanning processes, where the beholder fixes his attention on one feature at a time for a very brief period (about 300 msec.), and then moves on to focus on another feature. Hence, it does not seem to be especially controversial to admit that temporal processes are involved in the perception of pictures, thereby repudiating that any instantaneous understanding of either medium or message is possible.

As to studies on language, cognition, and mental imagery, since the 1990's something like a boom of empirical and neurological research has emerged, making use of e.g. neuroimaging technologies such as PET or fMRI. Accordingly, empirical and psychological research may shed some light on narratological issues, and it seems that narratologists -compared to other branches of philosophy, most notably perhaps philosophy of mind – have tended to dismiss such prospects. However, Prince himself, one of the most prominent narratologists, has relatively recently pointed to the necessity of empirical studies concerning narrative in general, but relatively few seem to have been done so far.[33]

This is particularly true for other semiotic resources than verbal language. Numerous studies seem to have corroborated that eye movements are strongly synchronized with and indicative of cognitive processes going on during spoken or written word recognition, sentence processing, and picture or visual scene encoding – and mental imagery in general. Whereas some general studies have been carried out in order to investigate the nature of picture as well as real-world scene perception,[34] others have specifically focused upon the relationship between eye movements elicited by pictures and spoken scene descriptions compared to those occurring when visualizing them from memory. Thus, extending theoretical concerns with empirical ones, i.e., by employing advanced eye-tracking methodology, might give further insights regarding the cognitive mechanisms involved in picture perception, and most notably the perception of narratives.

Be this as it may, one might still argue that temporal aspects of pictorial representations are rather dependent on the viewer's activities rather than on the object itself, which by nature is static and temporally

"frozen".[35] Such a narrow and essentialist view of pictorial representation may be questioned by pointing to a number of counterexamples. What about stage design or scene painting? In numerous cases such pictures are not static at all, but make use of moveable parts, such as representations of clouds and waves, as well as various lighting effects, such as strokes of lightning, thereby creating a changeable pictorial scene (in addition to moving subjects, such as the actors themselves). We may also consider stained glass windows in Gothic cathedrals that change with the varying intensity of light filtered through them, or fountains or sculptural installations that make use of water effects. In the twentieth century, there are even further examples of non-static pictures or at least borderline cases, such as mobiles or op art-paintings, such as Bridget Riley's "Crest" (1964).

1.2 Historical Examples of Pictorial Storytelling

Within contemporary aesthetics, it is widely claimed that any attempts to define concepts such as art in essentialist terms by referring to necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, whether perceptual, functional or procedural, are doomed to failure. Rather, we should think about the category *art* as being like a family whose members resemble each other in some, but not all, commonly shared, respects. This complicated network of similarities constituting the class of art works is, borrowing a Wittgensteinian term, called a *family resemblance*. This line of reasoning is quite familiar to those who are acquainted with contemporary aesthetics, especially analytic aesthetics. Moreover, numerous cognitive psychologists have followed Eleanor Rosch's pioneering work by attempting to investigate, by means of quite strict experimental procedures, the nature and acquisition of categories in general, particularly taxonomic categories.[36] According to Rosch, the results obtained from these experiments support the assumption that categories, psychologically speaking, do not usually have boundaries but possess a graded structure. The more attributes an item shares with other members in a category, and the fewer attributes it shares with members of contrast categories, the higher is its degree of family resemblance and thus typicality supposed to be. This also means that there are certain category members that are experienced as cognitive reference points, or the clearest cases of category membership, while other members gradually deviate from them, although they still belong to the category in question. Put in another way, categories are formed around their most representative instances, which possess a prototypical character.[37]

When it comes to narratives, we may also conceive of them as constituting a category with fuzzy boundaries; also in this case it seems

problematic to insist on a too rigid and essentialist view of their nature.[38] Narratives may be intertwined with descriptions, expositions, arguments, and explanations. Meaning-bearers may be more or less narrative, and narratives may be manifested in various genres, as those mentioned before. But if we admit the existence of temporal and narrative aspects in pictorial representations, the question still remains in which way(s) clear-cut (still) pictures, reliefs, or sculptures possess such features, and whether, and in which respects, some pictures might be regarded as more narrative than others.

As these last remarks suggest, theorists have complemented extensional approaches to stories with scalar accounts of narrativity -accounts featuring degrees of "narrativeness." Thus Prince contrasts an extensional treatment of issues of "narrativehood," in which the analyst treats narrative as some kind of object or entity, with an intensional treatment of "narrativeness," whereby a quality or rather a set of traits associated with narratives comes to the fore.[39] A quality frequently proposed as a criterion for narrativeness is the "tellability" of a story -that is, what makes it worth telling at all, or its noteworthiness (see also chapter 4). Originating from analyses of conversational storytelling by, for example, William Labov, this concept has come to be applied to numerous other kinds of narratives.[40] In this tradition, commentators have identified a number of features contributing to the tellability of a narrative, such as eventfulness, or changes of state, and the deviation of event or action sequences from pre-established expectations. Alternative criteria for tellability would include, for instance, suspense, curiosity, and surprise; unusualness; switches and contrasts; violations of certain orders (political, social, or moral); breaks with canonical scripts or schemas; sudden plot switches; and so on.[41]

Let us take a closer look at some of the ways in which pictures seem to have a relatively straightforward narrative function (and thus have temporal ingredients).[42]

First, we have numerous historical examples where static, monoscenic, and quite distinct pictures are linked in a narrative series having a fixed reading order, frequently horizontal or vertical. Modern instances of this kind of pictorial narration can be found in strip cartoons, but actually occur as early as in antiquity and the Middle Ages. Examples include scenes from the life of St. Ambrose on the back of the altar in S. Ambrigio, Milano, c. 850; the scenes from the Old and New Testaments on the bronze doors of the Hildesheim Cathedral (c. 1015, *figure 1-1*); Giotto's Passion scenes in his frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel (c. 1306-7, see also section 2.6); Gaudenzio Ferrari's Passion scenes in S M delle Grazie, Varallo (c. 1513);

and William Hogarth's series of moralizing engravings in the eighteenth century.

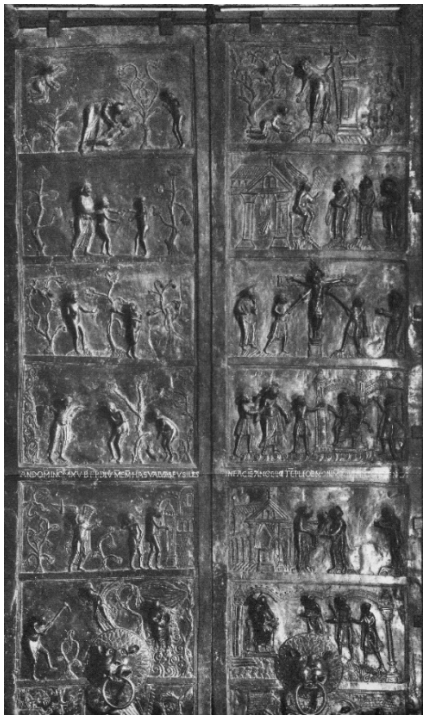

Figure 1-1. Bronze doors from St. Mary's Cathedral, Hildesheim (c. 1015), showing the Creation of Adam and Eve and the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden (left), birth and Passion of Christ (right); vertical reading orders: left top-down; right down-top.

Second, and relatively often discussed by art historians, there are single pictures showing different events and persons in the same pictorial space. In these cases, sometimes called "continuous narratives", cases of "simultaneous succession", or "polyphase pictures", various phases in an event series are represented simultaneously.[43] Such forms of pictorial narration are also found throughout history, for example, the epic-documentary representation on the column of Trajan of the emperor's war against the Dacians (c. 101-106 CE); Masaccio's fresco "Tribute Money", showing St. Peter three times in the same pictorial space -first scene in the middle, second to the left, third to the right (c. 1427; *figure 1-2*); Fra Filippo

Lippi's depiction of the Banquet of Herod in the Cathedral of Prato (c. 1460s); Bernardino Luini's Crucifixion in S. M. degli Angeli, Lugano (c. 1530).[44]

Figure 1-2. Masaccio: "Tribute Money" (1424-28); Brancacci Chapel of the Basilica of Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.

"The Legend of the Relics of St. John the Baptist" by Geertgen tot Sint Jans (c. 1484, *figure 1-3*) is an especially interesting example. In the background we see the separate burials of the head and the body after the decapitation of the Baptist, believed to have occurred in the first half of the first century CE (*figure 1-3a*). In the foreground is rendered the opening of the tomb and the burning of the limbs on the orders of the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate, c. 362 CE (*figures 1-3b, c*); in the center is shown the rediscovery of the rescued remains in the thirteenth century (*figures 1-3d, e*). However, the last scene also includes a group portrait of the Knights of the Order of St. John Convent in Haarlem, thus relocating the scene in the late fifteenth century, when the relics were given to the Order by the Turkish sultan (which was the specific reason for commissioning this painting). The implied time span in this pictorial narrative is thus remarkably extended, stretching over a period of more than 1,000 years.

Of course, numerous examples may be found where these two forms of pictorial narration are intertwined, for example in Lorenzo Ghiberti's reliefs on the Baptistery doors, the so-called "Porta del Paradiso", in Florence, 1424-1452, showing ten separate, though narratively linked, scenes from the Old Testament. These scenes constitute a narrative series consisting of distinct pictures, beginning with Adam and Eve, then showing Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham and Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David,

Figure 1-3. Geertgen tot Sint Jans: "The Legend of the Relics of St. John the Baptist" (c.1484; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

Figure 1-3a. Detail from figure 1-3.

Figure 1-3b. Detail from figure 1-3.

Figure 1-3c. Detail from figure 1-3.

Figure 1-3d. Detail from figure 1-3.

Figure 1-3e. Detail from figure 1-3.

and Solomon. However, almost all these reliefs are polyscenic or continuous narratives. In the picture showing Adam and Eve, for instance, we can distinguish between various scenes in the same pictorial space: (i) the creation of Adam; (ii) the creation of Eve; (iii) the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve; and (iv) the expulsion from Paradise.

A third kind of pictorial narration is static pictures, which seem to have a less straightforward narrative function. Historically seen, though, stories have frequently been manifested in non-verbal media having no (overt) temporal structure, that is, on the expression plane, such as single static pictures. In these cases, just a frozen scene in a tacit action sequence may be visible from which what has preceded and will follow has to be inferred by the beholder. Lessing's idea of the "pregnant moment" would very well fit into this category: only an arrested moment is directly represented, though it implies a wider, temporally extended action sequence. The Hellenistic sculpture group "Laocoön and his Two Sons" (first century CE, *figure 1-4*; see also section 2.3), which Lessing himself discussed at length, is an example where the depicted scene refers to a series of mythological events. The "pregnant moment" rendered here consists of the death struggle between the priest Laocoön and his two sons with two snakes sent by Athena as punishment for Laocoön's attempt to warn the Trojans from taking a wooden horse with Greek warriors hidden inside into the city. A beholder acquainted with the relevant narrative background might well see this sculpture as a significant or crucial moment within a narrative

sequence stretching backwards in time as well as into the future in which Laocoön and his sons are killed, and the Trojans are defeated by the Greeks.

Figure 1-4. "Laocoön and his Two Sons" (first century CE?; Vatican Museums, Rome).

Mythological, religious, political, and other broad narratives like this have frequently been rendered pictorially by visualizing significant segments of implied narrative structures. However, we may also think about static pictorial scenes that either simply refer to more common or even everyday action patterns that are narratively quite indeterminate. In section 1.4, taking research in cognitive psychology into account, I shall discuss how and in what ways pictures may have narrative implications and give rise to the emergence of narrative mental representations in beholders.

1.3 Meaning and Fiction in Pictorial Representations

However, before we examine some cognitive aspects of pictorial storytelling, let us first consider how pictorial representations may function as meaning bearers in non-narrative ways, or how pictures might be said to represent (i.e., having a relation in which it is said to be "of") something else. This overview does by no means exclude other possible (or less obvious meaning) functions of pictures: pictorial representations may be used in a number of extra-semiotic and pragmatic ways, and not all of them are intended to tell stories. But seen as representations in a more straightforward sense, we might say that a picture P can function as a